

## 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 13, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Tax Reliefs**

14. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance the number of primary medical certificate appeals currently outstanding; if there is an update on a new board to hear such appeals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9686/22]

79. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance when it is proposed to appoint a new Medical Board of Appeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9488/22]

80. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Finance if a new disabled drivers medical scheme appeals board has been appointed; if not, the timeframe for when a new board will be appointed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9703/22]

228. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the case of a person (details supplied); when the appeals board is being appointed; when hearings will recommence; and the interim measures being considered to deal with urgent cases in order that persons in need are not disadvantaged or suffering needlessly. [9167/22]

242. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Finance when persons with MS and other conditions who wish to appeal a decision regarding an application to the disabled drivers and passengers' scheme can expect an appeals committee to be in place and the processing of appeals to be resumed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9597/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 14, 79, 80, 228 and 242 together.

The Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme (DDS) provides relief from VRT and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant.

The Scheme is open to severely and permanently disabled persons who also meet one of six specified medical criteria, as a driver or as a passenger and also to certain organisations. In order to qualify for the Scheme, the applicant must hold a Primary Medical Certificate, a PMC, issued by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer (SAMO) in the HSE. Assessments for the primary medical certificate, by the HSE, are continuing to take place. Certain other qualifying criteria apply in relation to the vehicle, in particular that it must be specially constructed or adapted for use by the applicant.

In the event that a PMC is not granted by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer an appeal may be made to the independent Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal (DDMBA) who operate out of the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dun Laoghaire.

I have no role in relation to the granting or refusal of PMCs and the HSE and the Medical Board of Appeal must be independent in their clinical determinations.

As of 31st December 2021, there are 382 people awaiting an appeal hearing with the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal.

All members of the DDMBA have resigned. My officials engaged with the Department of Health and the Public Appointments Service to seek expressions of interest from medical practitioners to participate in the Board. I am informed that the formal notice seeking expressions of interest have been issued. It is hoped to move this process along as quickly as possible so that appeals can recommence as soon as possible.

Requests for appeal hearings can be sent to the DDMBA secretary based in the National Rehabilitation Hospital. New appeal hearing dates will be issued once the new Board is in place.

*Question No. 15 answered orally.*

## **Credit Unions**

16. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on engagements he has had with trade unions or credit union representatives on pensions. [9479/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy may be aware, as Minister, I have no role in the commercial decisions made by any credit union or their representative bodies.

Decisions in this regard, including those related to pensions, are the sole responsibility of the board and management of the credit unions.

I have agreed to meet with the Financial Services Union and SIPTU to hear their perspectives on the pension updates recently communicated to members of the ILCU multi-employer scheme.

I will continue to engage regularly with representative bodies and stakeholders in the credit union sector.

*Questions Nos. 17 and 18 answered orally.*

## **Financial Services**

19. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the situation with regard to the regulation of virtual or cryptocurrencies in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9447/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** It has always been my intention that any regulation in this space would be appropriately comprehensive without discouraging innovation.

In Ireland, as of 23 April 2021, providers of services of virtual assets such as digital assets

or cryptocurrencies must legally meet anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism obligations.

Thus, all virtual asset service providers established in Ireland are required to register with the Central Bank for anti money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism purposes.

Also, in September 2020, the European Commission published the Digital Finance Package.

This package contained measures to enable and support the development of digital finance in the European Union, while mitigating risks for consumers and the economy.

The package comprises four regulatory proposals:

1. A strategy on Retail Payments
2. A legislative proposal on a market in crypto-assets. This is known as the MICA regulation
3. A legislative proposal on digital and operational resilience. This is known as the DORA regulation
4. A legislative proposal on a pilot regime for market infrastructures based on distributed ledger technology. This is known as the DLT pilot.

On 24 November last year, the European Parliament announced that it had reached agreement with the Council on the DLT pilot scheme. So this is already in place.

The second element of the package, the MICA regulation proposal, is still under review by the European Parliament. The Council reached general agreement on this proposal under the Slovenian presidency in November of last year. The expectation is that trilogues would commence under the current French presidency.

All EU finance ministers agree to the utmost need to collaborate and approach regulation of cryptoassets in a joint, cohesive and holistic manner, in order to protect monetary sovereignty and preserve financial stability.

This sentiment is further supported by the G20 and G7 members.

My Department continues to work closely with our partners in the European Union, and globally, to ensure that the appropriate regulation recognises the risks presented by crypto assets.

## Tax Yield

**20. Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has updated projections for VAT receipts in 2022 relative to the estimates of receipts for the year ending 31 December 2022 as provided in the White Paper; if so, if he will provide those projections; and if his Department expects VAT receipts to be greater than previously forecast as a result of higher food and energy prices. [9715/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Irish VAT law must comply with the EU VAT Directive, which directs that Member States must apply a standard VAT rate of 15% or more, and can apply up to two reduced VAT rates of 5% or more. Ireland applies the 23%, 13.5% and 9% VAT rates in this context.

The standard rate of 23% applies to approximately 51% of activity, including cars, petrol,

diesel, alcohol, tobacco, electrical equipment and CD/DVDs.

The reduced rate of 13.5% applies to approximately 28% of activity, including fuel used for heat or light, construction, housing, labour intensive services and general repairs and maintenance.

The reduced rate of 9% applies to about 10% of activity, including holiday accommodation, restaurants, digital and print newspapers and periodicals, and sporting facilities.

A zero rate accounts for a little over 11% of activity, including to most food, books, children's clothes and shoes, and oral medicines.

In addition a super-reduced rate of 4.8% applies to livestock registered by farmers while some activity is entirely exempt from VAT, including transport, water, education, financial services, schools and hospitals, services provided by charities, etc.

VAT receipts for 2022 were projected at €16,895 million in Budget 2022. This was slightly above the White Paper projection of €16,770 million. My Department will update the forecast for taxation revenues in the Stability Programme Update, to be published in April 2022.

### **Tax Code**

21. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if an update will be provided on discussions with the European Commission regarding a temporary derogation on the rate of VAT applied on energy and gas usage; if he held discussions with other European Union Finance Ministers regarding the relaxation of such rules as part of a common approach to tackling rising energy prices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9481/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law with which Irish VAT law must comply. The VAT Directive obliges each Member State to have a standard rate of VAT and also allows that a Member State may choose to have no more than two reduced rates of VAT, which may be no less than 5%, and which may be applied to certain goods and services: any of those listed in Annex III of the Directive. Within this framework, Ireland currently applies a standard rate of 23% and two reduced rates of 13.5% and 9%.

As the Deputy will be aware, Article 102 of the VAT Directive provides that, after consultation with the EU VAT Committee, a Member State may choose to apply a reduced rate to the supply of natural gas, electricity, or district heating. The Commission recently indicated that this provision could be used by Member States without the requirement to consult the VAT Committee in advance. The Article 102 provision is not transposed into Irish legislation because Ireland, in line with the VAT Directive and by way of special derogation from the general rule, maintains several "standstill" provisions and derogations that allow us to maintain reduced rates to certain supplies for historical reasons. It is on this basis that Ireland applies its 13.5% reduced rate of VAT to the supply of fuel, gas, oil, and electricity services for both domestic and commercial use. The current 13.5% VAT rate applied to energy products is a 'parked rate', governed by Article 118 of the VAT Directive and standstill provisions from 1991 and cannot be reduced below 12%. In the event that Ireland chose to apply a reduced rate to the limited items covered by Article 102, those items could no longer rely on our derogation and those items would have to be returned to the standard rate of VAT in the future.

### **Illicit Trade**

22. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the proposals to implement additional measures to counteract illicit trade in fuel, drink and tobacco products; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9489/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am assured by Revenue that combating the threat which fuel fraud and the illicit alcohol and tobacco trades pose to legitimate businesses, consumers and the Exchequer continues to be a priority.

Steps taken by Revenue to combat the illegal mineral oils trade include the introduction of stringent supply chain controls and reporting requirements, a rigorous programme of risk focused enforcement action and the application of robust legislation. In addition, Revenue and the UK Revenue and Customs undertook a joint initiative to introduce a new marker for use in marked fuels, which came into operation in April 2015. The industry view is that the actions taken have been successful in curtailing fuel fraud.

Illicit trade in alcohol can occur through the diversion of untaxed alcohol onto the market, through the production of counterfeit alcohol and through smuggling from countries with lower taxes. I am aware that Revenue takes appropriate action where illicit activity is detected and that this action is informed by intelligence on criminal activity and risk-based examination of commercial traffic and stock in retail premises.

In relation to the tobacco trade, I am advised that Revenue uses a combination of risk analysis, profiling and intelligence, and risk-based screening of cargo, vehicles, baggage and postal packages to intercept illicit products. Action after importation includes checks at retail outlets, markets and private and commercial premises.

I am aware that Revenue and An Garda Síochána collaborate closely in acting against fuel, alcohol and tobacco crime, and also cooperate closely with their counterparts in Northern Ireland, in the framework of the Cross-Border Joint Agency Task Force. This cooperation plays a key role in targeting the organised crime groups who operate across both jurisdictions and are responsible for much of this criminality.

I am satisfied that Revenue's work against fuel fraud and the illicit alcohol and tobacco trades has achieved a considerable level of success. I know that Revenue is very conscious of the resourcefulness of those involved and remains vigilant for, and ready to respond to, any new developments in these areas.

*Questions Nos. 23 to 25, inclusive, answered orally.*

## **Insurance Industry**

26. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance the insights that have been gleaned from the new data reporting on insurance claims; and if he has identified scope for adding new actions to the insurance plan based on this information. [9459/22]

31. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Finance his views on more frequent reporting by the National Claims Information Database. [9678/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 26 and 31 together.

The National Claims Information Database (NCID) was established in order to improve transparency in the insurance claims environment and to support data-driven policy making. It

contains a wealth of information, including data on: the cost of premiums; the cost and frequency of claims; claims settlement; and the revenues, expenditures, and profitability of firms. Having initially focussed on the private motor insurance sector, under the *Action Plan for Insurance Reform* the scope of the NCID was expanded to facilitate the collection of data on employers' liability and public liability insurance claims, with the first such report being published last July.

These NCID reports provide a valuable insight into the key insurance markets for consumers and businesses, which is vital to further developing our understanding of how claims costs impact premiums. This should enable us to better-tailor reforms to the insurance sector. For example, the recently-published General Scheme of a Bill to reform the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, which aims to increase the number of cases settled through the Board, points to NCID data which shows that claims settled by the Board are settled more quickly, and attract much lower legal costs, than those that proceed to litigation.

In addition, the NCID will allow for an assessment of the impact of the many reforms already undertaken in the insurance sector. For example, I understand from the Central Bank of Ireland that the Private Motor Report to be published in 2022 will provide initial data on the newly introduced Personal Injuries Guidelines. The NCID is also continually looking to improve the transparency and insight that can be provided through these reports, and each edition has been amended to include more information.

With regard to more frequent reporting, I understand that the Central Bank of Ireland is also looking at the merits and feasibility of collecting the information contained in certain sections of the Motor NCID Report more frequently, where this would provide additional insight. For this reason, the Bank initially plans to publish supplementary information on motor premiums on a semi-annual basis. The merits and feasibility of providing any further information on a more frequent basis will be assessed in the future. To conclude, I welcome the information already provided by the NCID, and believe it will remain an excellent tool to ensure transparency in the insurance market into the future.

## **Tax Reliefs**

27. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider raising the €3.20 per day work from home allowance given the rise in the cost of electricity and utility bills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9457/22]

73. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration will be given to additional tax relief measures in budget 2023 for those working from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9669/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 27 and 73 together.

Where e-workers incur certain extra expenditure in the performance of their duties of employment remotely or from home, such as additional heating and electricity costs, there is a Revenue administrative practice in place that allows an employer to make payments up to €3.20 per day to such employees, subject to certain conditions, without deducting PAYE, PRSI, or USC.

Revenue is statutorily independent in the performance of its functions under, or for the purposes of, tax laws. Consequently, I am precluded from giving any direction or instruction to Revenue in regard to the review of any threshold relating to e-working.

However, Revenue advises me that there are currently no plans to increase the €3.20 allowance. The value of relief allowed under the administrative arrangements is already considered sufficient to cover any legitimate additional costs incurred by workers. The level of support allowed also compares favourably internationally.

As the Deputies will be aware, in the Finance Act 2021, I enhanced and formalised the tax arrangements for working from home in line with Government policy to facilitate and support remote working. Accordingly, an income tax deduction amounting to 30% of the cost of vouched expenses for electricity, heat and broadband in respect of those days spent working from home can be claimed by taxpayers.

The amount of the relief will depend on the particular circumstances of the remote worker in terms of the level of costs incurred and their marginal tax rate. This measure will provide some relief for those with additional expenses arising from working from home.

While I have no immediate plans to increase the tax relief for working from home, I would point out that the Government recently announced a €505 million package of measures to mitigate the cost of living, including a once-off energy credit of €200 including VAT. These measures will support all payers of domestic electricity bills to help to off-set rising prices. This is a measure that will benefit all households regardless of whether they have an income tax liability or not.

*Question No. 28 answered with Question No. 17.*

## **Inflation Rate**

29. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide updated projections from his Department on the rate of inflation for the years 2022, 2023 and 2024; if the projections will be disaggregated by income decile and household type; and if he will bring forward an anti-inflation strategy as called for by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment in response to the causes of inflation. [9695/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, my Department publishes two sets of macro-economic forecasts each year, one in the spring and one in the autumn, in line with our requirements under EU law.

Our spring forecasts will be published in April and set out in the *Stability Programme Update*. As is the norm, this will include inflation projections for the next few years. The projections will cover headline and core inflation and, in line with standard domestic and international practice, are not disaggregated by income group or household type.

I am conscious of the acceleration in consumer price inflation over the past six months or so, with similar trends seen across advanced economies. Several factors are behind this, including higher energy prices and global supply chain disruptions. On the domestic front, the strength and speed of the economic recovery has led to a mismatch between demand and supply, including in the labour market where I note CSO figures published last week showing the highest ever level of employment in our country.

The rate of inflation is expected to ease over the course of this year as temporary factors fade, demand eases and supply catches up.

Nevertheless, the Government is very conscious of the cost of living pressures facing households and, accordingly, introduced a number of measures in *Budget 2022* covering a range of

costs to people; including health, income supports, family and child costs, energy, education and housing costs.

In December, the Cabinet also approved an energy credit of €100 to be made this year to an estimated 2.1m domestic electricity account holders.

The Government announced another €290 million package on February 10th to further assist households, bringing the overall package including the aforementioned energy credit, to €505 million. The measures include an increase in the energy credit to €200 per household including VAT and an additional one-off payment of €125 for all those in receipt of the fuel allowance in March. The *Drugs Payment Scheme* contribution threshold will be reduced to €80 per month, while the €10 increase to the weekly income threshold of the *Working Family Payment* will be brought forward to April from June. Public transport fares will be reduced from April until the end of the year, while school transport family caps will be reduced at both primary and post-primary level.

In summary, the Government's response has been timely and forceful and will help to alleviate cost pressures for households, in particular those on low incomes.

### Tax Code

30. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance the steps his Department is taking to uncover, address and reduce bogus self-employment from a taxation and Revenue Commissioners perspective, especially in State-funded agencies or in areas in which public moneys are spent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7298/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** "Bogus self-employment" is the description commonly given to a scenario where an individual engaged to do a job is wrongly classified as being self-employed by an employer who seeks to avoid employment related obligations. From a tax perspective, this relates to income tax, Universal Social Charge (USC) and Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) (including Employer's PRSI) collected through the PAYE system. The implication for the individuals is that they do not have the benefit of certain employment related entitlements such as rates of pay, holiday pay, sick pay and certain social welfare benefits. It must be borne in mind that a worker's employment status is not a matter of choice; it depends on the terms and conditions of the job. While it is usually clear whether an individual is employed through a 'contract of service' or self-employed through a "contract for service", it is not always obvious. The question of employment versus self-employment status arises in three different areas: tax where it is determined by Revenue, Social Welfare where it is determined by the Department of Social Protection, and employment rights where the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) makes the determination.

A revised Code of Practice on Determining Employment Status was published by the Minister for Social Protection in July 2021. The purpose of the Code is to provide an enhanced understanding of employment status, taking into account current labour market practices and developments in legislation and case law. These developments include, for example, new forms of work such as platform work and the gig economy. It is a 'living document', which will continue to be updated to reflect relevant changes into the future. During the four years 2018 – 2021, Revenue staff, either on a standalone or joint-agency basis, visited 3,786 construction sites interviewing 14,968 contractors, sub-contractors, and employees at their site to make them aware of their compliance and other statutory obligations. As a result of these activities, 864 individuals were registered as new employees for PAYE and an additional 360 sub-contractors were reclassified as employees. In addition to construction site visits, Revenue staff carried out

a further 8,232 visits across a range of businesses in connection with normal shadow economy activity or compliance activity relating to Covid-19 support schemes.

Revenue applies a data-driven, risk-based approach to compliance interventions, utilising the information provided by all principal contractors on relevant contracts and payments to sub-contractors to refine their risk focus. This applies to both private and publicly funded projects. In addition to its compliance activity, Revenue provides customer service support to public bodies, assisting those bodies with voluntary compliance, so that the public bodies can be satisfied that they apply the correct treatment under the Code of Practice on Determining Employment Status. Lastly, Revenue officials regularly meet with counterparts in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Social Protection and the WRC to discuss matters of mutual interest relating to employment/self-employment and recent focus has been on consideration of improvements that could be made in dealing with bogus self-employment.

The Deputy may also wish to note that the EU Commission has recently published a draft Directive that is aimed at providing significant new rights to “platform workers” across all Member States.

*Question No. 31 answered with Question No. 26.*

### **Banking Sector**

32. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to reverse recent cuts to the bank levy given that a potential rise of European Central Bank rates will boost the incomes of Irish banks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9484/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Finance (No.2) Act 2013 introduced the Financial Institutions Levy for the three-year period 2014 to 2016 with the purpose of enabling the banking sector to contribute to economic recovery. Finance Act 2016 extended the levy to 2021. The annual yield of this levy has been approximately €150 million.

In advance of Budget 2022, and in light of the then pending lapse of the Levy, I took a decision to extend it for another year and to apply it only to those banks that will continue to operate in the Irish market going forward. This was announced in Budget 2022, and provided for in legislation is section 60 of Finance Act 2021.

Under the relevant provision, the banks remaining in the market will not pay anymore in 2022 than they paid in 2021. This means that the levy is expected to generate in the region of €87 million in 2022. The reason, I adopted this approach was due to my concern that any extra levy placed on these banks would be passed directly onto their customers.

My decision to exclude the two banks who are leaving the Irish market, Ulster Bank and KBC, was taken in order to minimise the potential for disruption to bank customers that could arise from a possible accelerated exit if they were made subject to the levy in 2022.

In relation to the future of the levy, I have asked my officials to examine the matter and to present me with options for my consideration in advance of Budget 2023.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the possible outcome of that work at this time.

### **Financial Services**

33. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the strategy for the development of Ireland's international financial services sector action plan 2022; and the way work by both IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland is supporting regional development in this sector. [9670/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The *Ireland for Finance* Action Plan 2022 was approved by the Government at its meeting on 25 January 2022. My colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for Financial Services, Credit Unions and Insurance, Deputy Seán Fleming, published Action Plan 2022 on 3 February 2022.

One of the five themes Minister Fleming has identified for Action Plan 2022 is 'Regionalisation and promotion'. IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland hold pivotal roles in delivering the regional policy commitments in the *Ireland for Finance* strategy. Currently, employment is at the highest level it has ever been in the international financial services sector, with over 30 per cent of these jobs located in the areas outside Dublin. Although it is the business owners and investors who are the final decision makers on where to establish operations, the State's enterprise agencies provide information, financial supports, and some of the physical infrastructure to enable and encourage balanced regional development. IDA Ireland is focused principally on promoting regional locations in Ireland to investors in international markets, and Enterprise Ireland provides a range of developmental supports to regionally based Irish owned companies in the sector, at all stages of development, who are looking to grow in international markets. Both enterprise agencies also provide valuable inputs to the development of policies and programmes by other state bodies in areas such as planning and education to ensure that policy on regional development is coordinated and well informed.

I would highlight to the Deputy that regional development is at the centre of IDA Ireland's new strategy 'Driving Recovery and Sustainable Growth 2021–2024', which will target half of all investments for regional locations. As such, IDA Ireland is committed to the pursuit of more balanced, compact regional development, which can deliver complimentary efficiency and equity gains, with the overall impact of helping to advance national development. Underpinning this strategy, IDA Ireland will target potential investment that advances regional development, as follows:

- (a) win investment that drives recovery and supports development in regional locations,
- (b) partner with existing regional clients to transform through innovation and upskilling,
- (c) seek to support transformation, spill overs, and linkages through cluster initiatives,
- (d) collaborate with clients and stakeholder to facilitate remote working opportunities, and
- (e) Continue to roll-out a regional property programme essential to regional delivery of investments.

During 2021, IDA Growth in Regions was particularly strong with 53% or 133 projects of the 249 investments won going to regional locations. Employment growth was recorded in every region of the country. IDA continues to prioritise regional locations for the IFS sector and has won a number of significant regional investments since 2020 across the sub-sectors of Fund Servicing, Insurance, Fintech and Payments. The increase in remote and hybrid working is increasing access for IDA clients to a broader national talent pool and this presents an opportunity for further regional development.

Strengthening regional enterprise development also remains a key focus for Enterprise Ireland as part of its new strategy for 2022 to 2024. Its responses will reflect the varying needs and opportunities of enterprise at all stages of development, across different regions including

financial services and fintech. This will encompass working directly with new and existing companies throughout the regions, supporting increased enterprise collaboration, and working in collaboration with regional stakeholders. Enterprise Ireland's supports are integrated with a national network of nine regional offices in Ireland and over 30 Enterprise Ireland offices in international locations that facilitate access to more than 60 countries.

At the launch of the Ireland for Finance Action Plan for 2022, Minister of State Fleming announced that the Department of Finance will be carrying out a mid-term update of the strategy to maintain the growth of the international financial services sector. The review will run alongside the implementation of the 2022 Action Plan, will inform the prioritisation of work and strategic direction in the future while building on the success achieved to date.

### **Consumer Protection**

34. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department is considering new laws and regulations with respect to buy now pay later services which are entering the Irish market and raise considerable consumer protections concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9706/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Addressing the issue that firms offering consumer credit at the point of sale does not require authorisation by the Central Bank has been a key element of the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Retail Credit and Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2021.

Committee Stage of the Bill is due to take place on the 23rd of February 2022 and the Government will put forward an amendment to the Bill that will capture within the scope of the Consumer Credit Act 'Buy Now Pay Later' (BNPL) credit agreements provided to consumers, including where such agreements do not levy interest or impose any other charge on a consumer that are advertised to consumers.

This in turn will mean that the providers of those agreements will fall within the scope of Central Bank regulation.

This will be in line with the intended Government policy that both the direct and indirect providers of credit to consumers should be subject to Central Bank regulation and, therefore, the Central Bank will be able to apply the relevant provisions of its Consumer Protection Code (and where considered necessary other relevant codes or regulations) to all entities which advertise the provision of BNPL agreements (including interest and cost free BNPL agreements) to consumers.

### **Credit Unions**

35. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance the engagement he has undertaken as part of the policy review for credit unions. [9308/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Since June 2021, Minister of State Fleming, who has responsibility for credit unions, has held 26 meetings with various credit union stakeholders including;

- the Representative Bodies;
- various collaborative ventures;

- the Registrar of Credit Unions;
- the Credit Union Advisory Committee and
- individual credit unions

These meetings have proven to be very informative and their outputs have fed into the Review of the Credit Union Policy Framework.

Separately, Department Officials from the Credit Union Policy Team have very regular engagement with sector stakeholders, including quarterly stakeholder roundtables, the next of which will take place before the end of February.

They also act as secretariat to the Credit Union Advisory Committee, which meets on a monthly basis.

### **Credit Unions**

36. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the publication of the credit union policy review framework. [9441/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Work on the Review of the Policy Framework is well advanced and we intend to issue proposals emanating from the Review for consultation shortly.

As part of the Review of the Policy Framework, Minister of State Fleming has conducted extensive stakeholder engagement, meeting with the representative bodies, collaborative ventures, service providers, the Credit Union Advisory Committee, the Registrar of Credit Unions and individual credit unions. The information gained from these meetings will help inform the next steps taken by Government.

In terms of supporting the sector to provide essential financial services to local communities, the following are some recent developments which highlight the potential of the sector to grow and fulfil a role in relation to community banking. **Lending and Investment** The Central Bank has in recent years reviewed both the lending and investment frameworks. Since 1 January 2020, credit unions now have a combined capacity to provide up to €1.1 billion in additional SME and mortgage loans, with further capacity available to credit unions who can comply with certain conditions or on approval by the Central Bank. As of September 2021, credit unions had a combined mortgage and SME loan book of circa €387 million, an increase of 19% year-on-year. Credit unions are permitted to place their surplus funds that have not been lent to members in a range of investments including Tier 3 Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs). I am pleased to share with the Deputy that three credit union backed funds have received approval from the Central Bank. Credit unions will be able to invest up to €900 million in these regulated funds, which will subsequently lend to AHBs. **SME Lending** Nineteen credit unions were approved in early 2021 for participation in the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme. Further, in November five credit unions were announced as participants in the Brexit Impact Loan Scheme (BILS). The BILS provides low-cost loans of €25,000 to €1.5m to eligible Brexit-impacted businesses. In total, SME lending has grown 6.9% year on year to end September 2021. Further development of SME lending in a controlled manner could also assist credit unions in growing and diversifying their loan book. **Access to Finance for Retrofit** The Government significantly increased the funding available to support retrofit. My officials have been engaging with stakeholders to support increased credit union participation in retrofit loan schemes. **Other Services** Other than member savings and lending, in order to provide “ad-

ditional services”, a credit union must receive approval from the Central Bank. 66 credit unions are approved to provide current accounts. The Central Bank has prescribed a list of exempt services which may be provided without requiring approval. The Central Bank is undertaking a review of the Exempt Services Schedule to ensure that the services listed reflect the current financial services landscape. The Central Bank has commenced a public consultation seeking views from stakeholders on the proposed changes arising from this review.

### Universal Social Charge

37. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will now consider abolishing the universal social charge and replacing it with a high-income social charge given the very severe impact of inflation and the rising cost of living, which is disproportionately impacting on low- and middle-income workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9672/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Universal Social Charge (USC) was designed and incorporated into the Irish taxation system in 2011 to replace the Health and Income Levies. Its primary purpose was to widen the tax base and to provide a steady income to the Exchequer to provide funding for public services. The USC is an individualised tax, meaning that a person’s liability to the tax is determined on the basis of a person’s own individual income and personal circumstances. It is a more sustainable charge than those it replaced and is applied at a low rate on a wide base.

The USC has played a vital part in meeting the many expenditure demands placed on the Exchequer, and USC receipts have been central to the current stability of the public finances since March 2020, despite the challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Receipts from the USC in 2021 amounted to €4.4 billion – 16.5% of total income tax receipts or 6.4% of total Exchequer receipts. The projected USC yield for 2022 is broadly similar.

If USC were to be abolished, it would be necessary to raise approximately €4.4 billion from other sources. The Deputy suggests replacing the USC with a high income social charge but the Deputy has not specified an appropriate level/rate for this charge or what income level would be considered a high income.

In any event, such a proposal would significantly narrow the income tax base and would expose our economy to significant risks in the event of a future economic downturn. Currently, it is estimated that 29.5% of taxpayer units have incomes greater than €50,000 and will pay 86.4% of the total income tax and USC for 2022. Furthermore, 8.3% of taxpayer units have incomes greater than €100,000 and will pay 55.5% of the total income tax and USC in 2022. A high income social charge could increase the marginal tax rate, which could create a clear disincentive to work and impact on the competitiveness of our tax code.

Ireland has one of the most progressive personal income tax systems in the world, which plays a crucial role in the process of income redistribution. Our redistributive tax system has been acknowledged by the IMF, the OECD and the ESRI. It is my view a broad-based, progressive income tax system, where the majority of income earners make some contribution but according to their means, is the most fair and sustainable income tax system in the long term.

As such, I have no plans to abolish the USC and replace it with a high income social charge.

*Question No. 38 answered with Question No. 25.*

## Insurance Industry

39. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the impact the ban on price walking will have on insurance premiums. [9440/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In line with commitments in the Programme for Government, the *Action Plan for Insurance Reform* contains a number of actions that aim to lower insurance costs for consumers. In this regard, under the Action Plan, my Department was tasked with examining the Central Bank's *Review of Differential Pricing in the Motor and Home Insurance Markets* and taking any appropriate actions as deemed necessary in light of the Bank's final report.

As the Deputy is aware, the Central Bank published its final report, along with a public consultation on proposals to strengthen the consumer protection framework in July 2021. Among the Bank's proposals is a ban on "price walking" in the motor and home insurance markets for personal consumers. Price walking is a form of differential pricing whereby consumers are charged higher premiums, relative to the expected cost, the longer they remain with an insurance provider. As such, it represents a *de facto* "loyalty penalty" on long-serving customers, with the Bank's findings showing that the premiums paid by certain policyholders deviate significantly from the expected costs to the insurer.

I therefore welcome the proposal to ban this practice, as I believe it will protect those customers who prefer to stay with their current insurer from being unfairly penalised for doing so in terms of the premium paid. As set out in its final report, I understand that the Bank's intention is to apply this ban on price walking from the point of second renewal, meaning that consumers who wish to switch provider would still be able to benefit from discounts for new business customers. As such, I believe it represents a balanced approach that is well-calibrated to the Irish market and the preference of consumers here.

In summary, I believe that the proposed ban on price walking is a very significant development which would ensure fairness and further strengthen protections for consumers in the motor and home insurance markets. In order to ensure that this is the case, my Department is currently advancing legislation which would require the Bank to report on the impact of this ban, or any other measures taken to target price walking, within 18 months of the measure coming into effect. This would provide timely oversight, thereby allowing the Government to act swiftly if further intervention is needed in order to protect consumers from any unfair loyalty penalty.

## Universal Social Charge

40. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of revenue raised each year since its inception by the universal social charge; the estimated amount to be collected in 2022; if consideration has been given to exempting all those earning the equivalent of a standard 39-hour week on the minimum wage from this charge; the estimated cost of doing so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9475/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The amount of revenue raised by the Universal Social Charge (USC) each year since its inception in 2011 is available on the Revenue website at the following link:

[www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/receipts/net-receipts.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/receipts/net-receipts.pdf)

For the convenience of the Deputy, the following table sets out the USC net receipts from 2011 to 2021.

### USC Net Receipts

Year	€ Millions
2011	3,114
2012	3,790
2013	3,930
2014	3,647
2015	4,147
2016	3,968
2017	3,724
2018	3,738
2019	3,797
2020	3,832
2021	4,399

The estimate yield for 2022 is €4,400m.

The USC was designed and incorporated into the Irish taxation system in 2011 to replace two other charges, namely the Health and Income Levies. Its primary purpose was to widen the tax base and to provide a steady income to the Exchequer to provide funding for public services.

The USC is an individualised tax, meaning that a person's liability to the tax is determined on the basis of his/her own individual income and personal circumstances. The USC is applied at a low rate on a wide base, which ensures that it is a stable and sustainable source of revenue for the State.

Currently individuals with incomes of less than €13,000 are exempt from USC. For 2022, it is estimated that 28% of all taxpayer units will be exempt from USC.

As regards the Deputy's suggestion to exempt all those earning up to the equivalent of a standard 39-hour week on the minimum wage from this charge, c. €21,295, it is estimated that such a proposal would cost €64m and €75m on a first and full year basis, respectively. It would also narrow the tax base by exempting approximately 39% of taxpayer units from the charge.

I would note that in recent Budgets, including Budget 2022, this Government actively increased the USC ceiling for the 2% rate in line with increases to the national minimum wage, to ensure that a full-time adult worker who benefits from the increase in the hourly minimum wage rate would remain outside the top rates of USC.

Ireland has one of the most progressive personal income tax systems in the world, which plays a crucial role in the process of income redistribution. Our redistributive tax system has been acknowledged by the IMF, the OECD and the ESRI. In my view, a broad-based, progressive income tax system, where the majority of income earners make some contribution but according to their means, is the most fair and sustainable income tax system in the long term.

### Tax Credits

41. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider the introduction of a refundable tax credit available to renters in the private rental market valued against

their monthly rental payments with an appropriate cap in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9708/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The previous tax relief in respect of rent paid was abolished in Budget 2011 and it is no longer available to those who commenced renting for the first time from 8 December 2010. This followed a recommendation in the 2009 report by the Commission on Taxation that rent relief should be discontinued. The view of the independent Commission was that, in the same manner in which mortgage interest relief increases the cost of housing, rent relief increases the cost of private rented accommodation. Accordingly, the result of reintroducing this relief would very likely be a transfer of Exchequer funding directly to landlords, which would not have the intended effect of reducing the cost pressure on tenants.

At the time of its abolition, the rental tax relief cost the Exchequer up to €97m per annum, and it is likely that this figure would be even higher today were a similar scheme to be put in place. The refundable element mentioned by the Deputy would potentially add further to the cost.

Proposals for new tax incentive measures are assessed in accordance with my Department's Tax Expenditure Guidelines. These make clear that it is important that any policy proposal which involves tax expenditures should only occur in limited circumstances. In particular, they provide that a tax-based incentive should only be considered where it would be more efficient than a direct expenditure intervention.

Having regard to these considerations, the case for introducing a refundable tax credit as outlined by the Deputy is not a strong one from my Department's perspective.

Finally, as the Deputy will be aware, the 'Housing for All' strategy is intended to deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs, including those who wish to rent at an affordable price. The strategy which was published by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage sets out a number of specific initiatives in relation to the rental market.

## **Tax Reliefs**

42. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration will be given to introducing a scheme to assist first-time buyers of homes that are not new builds, similar to the help-to-buy scheme and who cannot afford to purchase a new build; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9690/22]

227. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if there are schemes open to persons who are not a first-time buyer (detail supplied); if he will provide further details on such a scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9150/22]

235. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider extending the current help-to-buy scheme to cover second-hand houses for those counties such as County Longford in which there are no new build houses available (details supplied). [9343/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 42, 227 and 235 together.

The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive is a scheme to assist first-time purchasers with the deposit they need to buy or build a new house or apartment. The incentive gives a refund on Income

Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in the State over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation. Section 477C Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997 outlines the definitions and conditions that apply to the HTB scheme.

In relation to Deputy O’Sullivan’s question, an increase in the supply of new housing is fundamental to resolving the current housing crisis. The HTB scheme is specifically designed to encourage an increase in demand for new build homes in order to encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. A move to introduce a similar scheme for second-hand properties would not achieve this aim; on the contrary, it could serve to dilute the incentive effect required in terms of encouraging additional supply of new properties. In passing, I might note that the number of housing commencements for 2021 at over 30,700, and up from 21,686 in 2020, is very encouraging. As the Deputies may be aware, the Housing for All Strategy has as a target the construction of an average of at least 33,000 new homes per year out to 2030.

With regard to the suggestion by Deputy Flaherty that the HTB scheme be extended to second-hand properties in Longford, I refer to my point above regarding the intended incentive effect of the scheme to increase overall supply by encouraging new builds. Furthermore, it would not be possible or equitable for me to amend the scheme in favour of any particular county or region.

As the Deputies will appreciate, decisions regarding taxation measures are usually made in the context of the annual Budget and Finance Bill process. Such decisions must have regard to the sound management of the public finances and my Department’s Tax Expenditure Guidelines. The guidelines make clear that any policy proposal which involves tax expenditures should only occur in limited circumstances where there are demonstrable market failures, where a tax-based incentive is more efficient than a direct expenditure intervention.

In relation to Deputy Smyth’s question, matters regarding housing initiatives are, in the first instance, a matter for the Minister for Housing. However, I can confirm that the only tax-based scheme relevant in this case is HTB and it is restricted to First-Time Buyers. Section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 requires that applicants for the scheme must be first-time buyers. This includes circumstances where there is more than one person involved in the purchase or building of a new home. The definition of first time buyer under HTB is as follows:

*“ first-time purchaser ’ means an individual who, at the time of a claim under subsection (3) has not, either individually or jointly with any other person, previously purchased or previously built, directly or indirectly, on his or her own behalf a dwelling; “*

The intention is to target the HTB scheme on those who have not had the opportunity to build up equity in another property which could be used to purchase the second or subsequent property.

Finally, and as the Deputies may be aware, I announced in my Budget 2022 address that a formal review of the scheme will take place in 2022. The review will be fundamental in nature and will inform decisions for Budget 2023 and Finance Bill 2022. Issues related to the terms of reference and a specific timeline for completion as well as the question of who will carry out the review are being considered by my Department at present and the matter is expected to be moved forward shortly.

## **Insurance Industry**

43. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Finance the action being taken to reduce the cost of motor insurance premiums. [9310/22]

48. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Finance the amount by which motor insurance premiums have fallen since the current Government entered office in June 2020. [9679/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 43 and 48 together.

The Government recognises that the cost of insurance is a significant issue for many groups, including motorists, and is therefore continuing to prioritise this issue through the work of the Cabinet Committee Sub-Group on Insurance Reform. In this regard, the Sub-Group is pursuing 66 cross-departmental actions, as set out in the *Action Plan for Insurance Reform*, including a number of key measures that should help to improve costs for motorists.

Chief among these was the delivery, last year, of new Personal Injuries Guidelines to replace the Book of Quantum, which should provide greater certainty regarding award levels. The Guidelines have significantly reduced awards for many common injuries, and should also help to lower legal fees by encouraging greater use of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board (PIAB) in settling claims. As a result, consistent implementation of the Guidelines should reduce the cost of claims, in turn leading to lower premiums.

Another key development with respect to motor insurance is the proposal by the Central Bank, following its extensive review of differential pricing, to ban the practice of “price walking” in the motor and home insurance markets for personal consumers from July this year. This is a very significant move, as it would end the “loyalty penalty”, whereby motorists and other consumers are charged higher premiums, relative to the expected cost, the longer they remain with an insurance provider.

According to the latest CSO Consumer Price Index data for January 2022, the price of motor insurance is now 11% lower than in June 2020, when this Government was formed, and has fallen by about 10% since the Insurance Reform Sub-Group was established in September 2020. This reflects a downward trend seen in recent years, with motor insurance prices having decreased by 38% from their peak level in mid-2016. At a time of other inflationary pressures in the economy, I believe this significant decline in prices indicates that past reforms by the Cost of Insurance Working Group, as well as the more recent achievements under the Action Plan, are contributing to positive developments in motor premiums.

Minister Fleming and I, along with officials, will continue to work with colleagues to complete the outstanding reforms under the Action Plan, with a view to improving the affordability of insurance for all groups. For example, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has recently published legislative proposals to enhance the role of the PIAB, which should bolster the advantages accruing from the Personal Injuries Guidelines, and further help to reduce the overall cost of claims. Both Minister of State Fleming and I remain committed to holding the industry to account so as to ensure that the benefits of this series of reform measures are reflected in the price of insurance, including for motorists.

### **Tax Reliefs**

44. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider an incentive package for owners and buyers in respect of properties that were available as short-term rental properties up to 1 February 2022, in circumstances in which the property would be made available for purchase by a first-time buyer for a limited period; if he will consider such a new scheme as a matter of urgency in the context of the proliferation of short-term properties nation-

wide despite the acute shortage of houses for long-term lease or affordable purchase; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9469/22]

47. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has considered the options available to eliminate the element of taxation impacting on the cost of purchasing or building a house as a first-time buyer and the cost of selling a house to a first-time buyer; his views on whether targeted taxation breaks for sellers to first-time buyers and to first-time buyers and self-builders themselves could significantly contribute to reducing prices for first-time buyers and self-builders, increasing available stock on the market for first-time buyers and providing first-time buyers with a competitive advantage over investors; if he will consider a new scheme as a matter of urgency in this context; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9468/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 44 and 47 together.

My assumption in this response is that the Deputy is referring to taxation and incentives relating to capital taxes and stamp duty. As the Deputy will be aware from previous replies there are already a number of existing capital tax reliefs that are available to property owners selling their home and additional assistance to first-time buyers such as the Help to Buy scheme (More information is available at [www.revenue.ie/en/gains-gifts-and-inheritance/cgt-reliefs/index.aspx](http://www.revenue.ie/en/gains-gifts-and-inheritance/cgt-reliefs/index.aspx) and [revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-46.pdf](http://revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-46.pdf)).

I am very conscious of the need to increase the supply of property available, particularly for first time buyers. In this regard, the Government has introduced a detailed plan for housing – Housing for All – which is intended to deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs and this government has allocated a record amount of funding under this strategy.

However, it is important to note that, taxation is only one of the policy levers available to the Government through which to boost overall housing supply. In line with the Department of Finance’s Tax Expenditure Guidelines, consideration of whether a tax measure is the most appropriate policy tool for a given purpose is required and the presumption should be that non-tax measures should be considered before the use of a tax-based measure. I would wish to avoid any tax expenditures that could distort the market, particularly where it is not clear that they would in this instance result in additional supply or reduced prices for first time buyers. Therefore I do not propose to introduce additional capital tax reliefs for gains from property sales.

In respect of stamp duty, as it is the buyer who is liable for payment of it, not the seller, if I were to provide any form of exemption/relief from it for a subset of properties or property buyers it would represent an unfair advantage to the sellers and/or buyers of such properties over those selling/buying properties that would not qualify. It is also very likely that any benefit that such a measure might generate for a subset of sellers/buyers would be quickly swallowed up by increased asking/offer prices, as the volume of such properties is unlikely to be sufficient to deflect market trends to any notable degree. Such a measure would also likely feed demand and compound what is already a significant supply side problem.

The Deputy should also note that a significant motivation for introducing the 10% stamp duty charge on the multiple purchase of houses is to dis-incentivise such purchases by institutional investors with a view to levelling the playing field for first time buyers and others interested in buying a home to live in. This measure should help improve the supply of houses available to first time buyers.

Finally, I would also draw the Deputy's attention to the particular actions within the Housing for All plan that specifically target first time buyers:

- a supply of an unprecedented 4,000 affordable purchase homes, on average, every year for families, couples and single people
- a new local authority-led 'Affordable Purchase Scheme'
- a new 'First Home' shared equity scheme for buyers of new build homes in private homes
- a reformed 'Local Authority Home Loan' scheme
- an 'Owner Occupier Guarantee', to secure homes for first-time buyers and other owner-occupiers

### **Tax Collection**

45. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance the amount his Department estimates it received in overpaid PAYE taxes in 2020 and 2021; the measures that are in place to make persons aware of any overpayments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9684/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that it has to date refunded €409 million to PAYE taxpayers in respect of 2020 and €250 million in respect of 2021. Any overpayments due to PAYE taxpayers can only be quantified when they submit their tax returns at the end of the year and claim any additional credits or reliefs that may be due. For this reason, it is not possible to provide the Deputy with an estimate of potential overpaid tax for the years in question. Revenue has also confirmed that it issues reminder letters every year to PAYE taxpayers who did not claim any additional credits in the previous four years, advising them that they may be entitled to further tax relief depending on their individual circumstances. The reminder letters also advise taxpayers of the four-year time limit in respect of submitting such claims. For example, income tax returns from PAYE employees in respect of 2021 may be submitted up to 31 December 2025.

### **Banking Sector**

46. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the third phase of the Switch Your Bank campaign; the effectiveness of the previous two campaigns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9712/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** On the 4th February I announced the commencement of the third and final phase of the Switch Your Bank campaign.

Following on from the successful delivery of two advertising campaigns which promoted awareness on the benefits of switching, this phase builds on this work by seeking to identify and develop tools which will better enable consumers to complete their switches.

To build upon the previous positive campaigns, the Economic and Social Research Institute's (ESRI) Behavioural Research Unit has been contracted to carry out an experimental research project that will focus on the behavioural aspects of switching.

The campaign will continue to be supported by a dedicated website, [www.switchyourbank](http://www.switchyourbank).

ie . The website provides a single source where consumers can access useful facts about switching, including a straightforward step by step guide, links to Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) comparison tools and helpful information to support their decision-making.

I would encourage all consumers to seek the best value for financial products and services and to compare the benefits of the different products available.

*Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 44.*

*Question No. 48 answered with Question No. 43.*

## **Tax Reliefs**

49. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Finance the reason that a review of the disabled drivers and passengers scheme which he committed to have completed in 2021 was not completed in this timeframe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9704/22]

248. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the review of the primary medical certificate system; the engagement he or his Department has had with the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth in this regard; the timeline for the review; the terms of reference of the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9727/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 49 and 248 together.

The Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme provides relief from Vehicle Registration Tax and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant.

The Scheme is open to severely and permanently disabled persons as a driver or as a passenger and also to certain charitable organisations. In order to qualify for relief, the applicant must hold a Primary Medical Certificate issued by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer (SAMO) or a Board Medical Certificate issued by the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal. Certain other qualifying criteria apply in relation to the vehicle, in particular that it must be specially constructed or adapted for use by the applicant.

To qualify for a Primary Medical Certificate an applicant must be permanently and severely disabled, and satisfy at least one of the following medical criteria, in order to obtain a Primary Medical Certificate:

- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both legs;
- be wholly without the use of one leg and almost wholly without the use of the other leg such that the applicant is severely restricted as to movement of the lower limbs;
- be without both hands or without both arms;
- be without one or both legs;
- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both hands or arms and wholly or almost wholly without the use of one leg;
- have the medical condition of dwarfism and have serious difficulties of movement of the

lower limbs.

The current medical criteria were included in the Finance Act 2020, by way of amendment to Section 92 of the Finance Act 1989. This amendment arises from legal advice in light of the June 2020 Supreme Court judgement that the medical criteria in secondary legislation was not deemed to be invalid, nevertheless it was found to be inconsistent with the mandate provided in Section 92 of the Finance Act 1989 (primary legislation).

As the Deputy will appreciate this Scheme confers substantial benefits to eligible persons and changing the medical criteria to more general mobility-focused criteria, would raise the already considerable cost of the Scheme in terms of tax foregone to the Exchequer. Any increase in the cost of the Scheme would require a concomitant increase in tax, reduction in public expenditure, or increase in the Exchequer deficit.

While I am very aware of the importance of this scheme to those who benefit from it, I am also aware of the disquiet expressed by members of this house and others in respect of the difficulties around access to the scheme.

Accordingly, I gave a commitment to the House that a comprehensive review of the scheme, to include a broader review of mobility supports for persons with disabilities, would be undertaken. In this context I have been working with my Government colleague, Roderic O’Gorman, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. We are both agreed that the review should be brought within a wider review under the auspices of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, to examine transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities. Its work was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the most appropriate forum to meet mutual objectives in respect of transport solutions/mobility supports for those with a disability.

The NDIS working group, chaired by Minister Anne Rabbitte, with officials from both my Department and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as well as others, held its first meeting on the 26th January 2022. My officials will continue to work closely with officials from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to progress this review, and on foot of that will bring forward proposals for consideration.

## **Tax Code**

50. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration has been given to amalgamating income tax and the universal social charge into one tax raising the same revenue rather than having two separate taxes on income; the advantages of the present system over having a single coherent tax on income; the disadvantages of it from a taxpayer and Revenue Commissioners point of view; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9476/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Universal Social Charge (USC) was designed and incorporated into the Irish taxation system in 2011 to replace two other charges, namely the Health and Income Levies. Its primary purpose was to widen the tax base and to provide a steady income to the Exchequer to provide funding for public services.

Both income tax and the USC are taxes on income, however they are structurally different with some material differences between the two in relation to each system’s income base, range of reliefs available and the manner of assessment.

Income tax applies to all sources of income earned by an individual, as calculated in accordance with provisions of the Income Tax Acts. Income tax also applies to certain income of trusts and non-Irish resident companies. An individual's entitlement to tax credits and their standard rate cut off point is determined based on his or her personal circumstances.

The income tax system provides for a wide range of tax credits, deductions and exemptions which may be used to reduce either the amount of income on which an individual is taxable, or the individual's ultimate income tax liability. Eligibility for these reliefs is subject to the individual meeting the relevant conditions attached to each measure.

Within the income tax system, married couples or civil partners, may be able to transfer tax credits, tax bands and reliefs from one partner to the other. Whereas the USC is an individualised tax, meaning that a person's liability to the tax is determined on the basis of his/her own individual income and personal circumstances.

Similar to income tax, there are different rates of USC and cut off points, however the rates and cut off points differ to that of the income tax regime.

The USC system incorporates different rates applicable to different levels of income and different sources of income. It should also be noted that some expenditure that qualifies for relief from an income tax perspective, may not qualify for relief from a USC perspective. Such expenditure includes payments into a pension scheme and permanent health benefit contributions. Further to this, all Department of Social Protection (DSP) payments and similar type payments made under the Social Welfare Acts are exempt from USC, while some DSP payments are not exempt from income tax.

An amalgamation of income tax and USC into one tax would require fundamental changes to the structure of the personal income tax system and may have consequential impacts on Exchequer receipts and would likely present a number of considerable challenges in relation to the systems underpinning both income tax and USC.

In 2016, joint Department of Finance/Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research found that USC represented a more stable form of revenue than income tax. The findings highlighted that USC revenues would fluctuate by less than income tax revenues whenever income is volatile, for example where the economy moves from a boom into a bust. Given the openness of the Irish economy and consequent susceptibility to economic shocks, the contribution that the USC makes to the stability of the State's revenue sources is considerable.

On the face it, a single unified system of personal income tax may appear to offer advantages as compared with current arrangements. However, as the Deputy will be aware, work was carried out on examining the possibility of an amalgamation of USC and PRSI. Many of the significant challenges outlined in "The Report of the Working Group on the Amalgamation of USC and PRSI", published in September 2018, remain valid in the context of an amalgamation of USC and Income Tax. The Report can be located here –

[assets.gov.ie/180893/1c9cd219-fb8a-47d2-86c3-d1cd9c3bcf03.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/180893/1c9cd219-fb8a-47d2-86c3-d1cd9c3bcf03.pdf)

There are no plans at present to carry out any further analysis on the proposal suggested by the Deputy.

## **Tax Reliefs**

51. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if an update will be provided on his

plans to reform the way in which capital gains are treated under the Key Employee Engagement Programme; the cost of the programme to the Exchequer for each year from 2017 to 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9483/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Under the Key Employee Engagement Scheme (KEEP) incentive, gains realised on the exercise of qualifying share options granted between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2023 by employees and directors, will not be subject to income tax, USC or PRSI. In order to qualify for KEEP, an option must be exercised within 10 years of grant. The gain will however be subject to Capital Gains Tax on subsequent disposal of the shares. This can result in a saving for scheme participants; this is the point of the scheme and notwithstanding the information about the proposed review below, there are no plans to fundamentally alter this aspect.

The cost to the Exchequer of KEEP for the year 2019 was €78,000 and for the year 2020 it was €186,000. As no exercise of share options occurred during the years 2017 and 2018, there was no cost to the Exchequer in terms of income tax, USC and PRSI for those years. Details of the cost to the Exchequer for 2021 will only be available once the employer returns for that year have been received and processed. The 2021 return is due by 31 March 2022.

Finally, in the course of the current year and ahead of Budget 2023, my Department intends to review the KEEP scheme, focussing on its operation and effectiveness.

## **Economic Policy**

52. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance the action he is taking to maintain Ireland's economic competitiveness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9494/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Ireland's economic recovery has been remarkable. The most recent data for modified domestic demand – the best measure of domestic economic activity – showed continued growth, with domestic activity surpassing its pre-pandemic level. Whilst the domestic economy is rapidly bouncing back, external trade has bolstered the Irish economy throughout the crisis.

The exports of the multinational sector in Ireland proved highly resilient during the pandemic, and MNCs supported the Irish economy via employment and taxes. Importantly this growth is now becoming more broadly balanced with the indigenous traded sector rebounding strongly last year.

I am very conscious of the contribution Ireland's exports make to the economy, and the need to maintain our competitive advantage on the international stage. The Irish modified current account, which strips out the distorting effects of globalisation, is also in a very strong position and is expected to remain in surplus over the medium term.

The strong recovery in the economy has helped drive the recovery in the labour market, with 2.5 million now in employment and the Covid-19 adjusted unemployment rate falling from a peak of 31.5 per cent in April 2020 to 7.8 per cent in January 2022.

Against this positive economic backdrop we cannot become complacent and we must remain cognisant of the challenges to our competitiveness both now and into the future. As the economy approaches full employment, wage pressures are likely to emerge which could in turn feed through to persistent inflationary pressure. Indeed, shortages are already emerging in certain sectors.

Looking to the future, the international outlook remains a source of continued uncertainty and I am acutely aware of the risks this poses. There is expected to be a negative implication for Irish trade once the UK fully implements the trade provisions of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. The Government continues to engage with the EU and the UK to minimise the disruption created by Brexit, and a great deal has been done to ensure Irish businesses are adequately prepared for its still unfolding effects.

Beyond Brexit, Ireland, as a small open economy, remains particularly exposed to global risks, including the worsening epidemiological situation, persistent supply side bottlenecks, energy price shocks, global inflationary pressure and rising geopolitical tension. My Department will continue to monitor the risks to Ireland's competitiveness closely, and this Government will respond to them as required to protect and promote the Irish economy.

### **Tax Reliefs**

53. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance when he expects to conclude a promised review into providing agricultural contractors with a similar status to farmers regarding the carbon tax on green diesel; and if it is intended to complete such a review prior to carbon tax increasing in 2022. [9371/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The present position is that agricultural contractors are not entitled to avail of relief from increases in the carbon tax on farm diesel under section 664A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. This is because farming, which is defined in section 654 of the Taxes Consolidation Act, requires the occupation of farmland. Agricultural contracting does not involve the occupation of farmland. The measure is specifically targeted at the farming sector to address the particular problems faced by family farms.

My officials met with contractors' representatives in December 2019 and advised that my Department was intending to schedule a review of the scheme (and related aspects) in the context of a wider report on agri-tax reliefs and the Government's Climate policy. I have since received further correspondence from those representatives, most recently on 15 February last.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the intervening period caused the review to be deferred and it has yet to take place. In the meantime, the status quo has remained in relation to the application and scope of section 664A. As I advised the Deputy in December last, my Department intends to carry out the review, most likely in the first half of 2022.

It should also be noted that, currently, those who incur expenses in relation to farm diesel in the course of their trade of agricultural contracting may claim an income tax or corporation tax deduction for these expenses, including any carbon tax charged in respect of the diesel.

Finally, and as the Deputy will appreciate, decisions regarding taxation measures are made as part of the annual Budget and Finance Bill process at the appropriate time and having regard to the sound management of the public finances and my Department's Tax Expenditure Guidelines. Furthermore, I must also have regard to ensuring that any tax measures are consistent with the need to meet our Climate Action Plan targets.

### **Banking Sector**

54. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the action he can take to increase competition in the banking sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[9448/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** While competition issues generally are primarily a matter for the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, competitive pressures in the banking sector can clearly have an effect on the functioning of the financial system and the on the quality and price of credit and other banking services provided to customers.

The Irish retail banking system is relatively concentrated by international standards and the recent decisions by some banks to leave the Irish market will further impact on this. However, against this it should also be noted that some new lenders have entered the market and are playing a greater role in the provision of new services. More generally, it is likely that increased competition in the provision of financial services globally will take place and that this will have an influence in Ireland with potential new entrants to the deposit-taking, credit and payments markets for households and businesses.

The European Union's initiatives in the context of the Capital Markets Union, which aim to improve the provision of financial services across borders within the Union, also have the potential to further improve levels of choice regarding savings and investments for consumers, and to improve access to finance for businesses in the Irish economy. Further, the scope for provision of services within the Union will be enhanced by the adoption of digital financial technologies already underway.

Even in a concentrated banking system such as that in place in recent years, price competition is possible, particularly in a growing economy. Trends show that interest rates in Ireland have been falling in recent years, providing benefit to consumers. Interest rates on new mortgages (excluding renegotiations) have fallen from 4.05% in December 2014 to 2.69% in December 2021. SME and consumer loans interest rates have also declined over the same period.

However, I fully appreciate that enhanced sustainable competition in the credit and banking market more generally will be of benefit to consumers and other borrowers. Accordingly, the review of the retail banking market which is now underway in my Department will assess various aspects of the banking market and will consider options to encourage greater competition in the credit and banking market, including possible options to develop the mortgage market.

### Tax Code

55. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department intends to apply reduced VAT rates to solar panels in light of the agreement reached on 7 December 2021 by the Council of the European Union (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9477/22]

59. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the application of reduced VAT rates on the repair, rental or supply of bicycles, including e-bikes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9478/22]

82. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Finance if an update will be provided on his Department's work to review options now available in setting VAT rates on new sanitary products, such as menstrual cups and period proof underwear in view of the agreement reached on 7 December 2021 by the Council of the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9534/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 55, 59 and 82 together.

As the Deputies will be aware, the EU Commission published a proposal on the reform of VAT rates in January 2018 which would allow Member States more flexibility in how they apply VAT rates. The compromise text agreed at ECOFIN in December has been amended significantly in comparison to the original proposal so the EU Parliament will once again be consulted for their opinion.

Once the Parliament has issued its opinion on the proposal, the Council will formally adopt the directive. It will then enter into force on the twentieth day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.

In the interim officials in my Department will be reviewing the options now available to Ireland in setting VAT rates. Future tax changes are generally taken in the context of the Budget. Deputies will be aware that my officials prepare a series of papers containing tax options for the Tax Strategy Group to be considered in the context of the budgetary process, alongside a wide range of submissions from various stakeholders and lobby groups.

### **Tax Avoidance**

56. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has considered developing a strategy with respect to cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens given concerns regarding their respective use for purposes of tax avoidance, tax evasion and money laundering; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9699/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I have indeed considered whether specific dedicated actions or strategies are required in relation to cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens, and not only the tax or money laundering aspects.

No separate strategy is required currently in respect of cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens in order to prevent tax evasion, avoidance or money laundering, on two counts:

1) Current tax legislation principles apply to cryptocurrencies, as advised by Revenue on December 16th 2021: the direct taxes applicable to cryptocurrencies are corporation tax, income tax and capital gains tax.

The relevant legislation and case law must be applied to determine the correct tax treatment. Each case must be considered on the basis of its own individual facts and circumstances. For example,

- for businesses which accept payment for goods or services in cryptocurrencies there is no change to when revenue is recognised or how taxable profits are calculated

or

- where there is an underlying tax event on a transaction involving the use of a cryptocurrency, the requirement in the tax code for a record to be kept of that transaction, including any record in relation to the cryptocurrency, also applies.

2) In relation to money laundering, Ireland transposed the 5th anti-money laundering Directive (5AMLD) into Irish law by way of the Criminal Justice (Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing) (Amendment) Act 2021 (“2021 Act”) and the provisions of the 2021 Act that relate to Virtual Asset Service Providers commenced on 23 April 2021.

The changes in the Act resulted in virtual currency exchange platforms and custodian wallet providers being in-scope of the anti-money laundering (AML), including rules for the perfor-

mance of various client due diligence checks and other requirements when onboarding new customers.

VASPS in Ireland must adopt controls and procedures to counter money laundering or terrorist financing (ML/TF) risks, report suspicious transactions and become registered with the Central Bank of Ireland.

### **Mortgage Interest Rates**

57. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if and when it might be possible for home borrowers in Ireland to borrow at interest rates equal to those available to borrowers in all other European countries given the severity of the housing shortage in Ireland, the necessity to ensure that home financing is affordable and in line with prevailing conditions in the Single Market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9487/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am aware that the general level of new lending interest rates in Ireland are higher than is the case in many other European countries. However, the price lenders charge for their loans is a commercial matter for individual lenders. As Minister for Finance I cannot determine the lending policies of individual banks including the interest rates they charge for loans including mortgages.

Despite this, it should also be noted that recent trends indicate that certain mortgage rates have been falling in Ireland. For example, the interest rates on new mortgages (excluding renegotiations) have fallen from 4.05% in December 2014 to 2.69% in December 2021.

The weighted average interest rate on new fixed rate mortgage agreements stood at 2.59% in December 2021, down from a series high of 4.11% in December 2014. There has also been a reduction in the interest rates charged on loans to SMEs and consumers over the same period.

However, Irish mortgage and other loans can have different characteristics from those offered in other countries. For example, many Irish banks include incentives such as cash back offers, which reduce the effective Irish mortgage interest rate. Also Irish mortgages are generally not subject to upfront fees which are typically charged by banks in some other EU jurisdictions.

There are also a number of important factors which will likely influence the interest rates charged on Irish mortgages. These include for example operational costs, certain structural factors as referenced above (such as incentives offered), as well as the fact that pricing will reflect:

- credit risk and capital requirements which in Ireland are elevated due to historical loss experience;

- the level of non-performing loans which is higher in Ireland relative to other European banks (as provisioning and capital requirements are higher for these loans to reflect their higher risk and this in turn results in higher credit and capital costs for the Irish banks); and

- higher cost-to-income ratios which has been a characteristic of the Irish banking sector in recent years

Separately the Central Bank introduced a number of increased protections for variable rate mortgage holders which came into effect in 2017. The enhanced measures, which are provided for in an Addendum to the Consumer Protection Code 2012, require lenders to explain to borrowers how their variable interest rates have been set, including in the event of an increase.

The measures also improve the level of information required to be provided to borrowers

on variable rates about other mortgage products which could provide savings for the borrower and signpost the borrower to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission's (CCPC) mortgage switching tool.

The Central Bank also introduced additional changes to the Consumer Protection Code in 2019 to help consumers make savings on their mortgage repayments, provide additional protections to consumers who are eligible to switch, and facilitate mortgage switching through enhancing the transparency of the mortgage framework. Consumers can reduce average pricing in the mortgage market by availing of switching options to ensure that recent and potential future price reductions through increased competition pass through to the greatest number of customers possible. Indeed a Central Bank study estimated that three in every five 'eligible' mortgages for principal dwelling homes stand to save over €1,000 within the first year if they switch and €10,000 over the remaining term.

To conclude I appreciate that greater sustainable competition in the credit market will be of benefit to consumers and other borrowers. Accordingly, the review of the retail banking market which is now underway in my Department will consider how the banking system can best support economic activity, assess competition and consumer choice in the market for banking services and consider options to further develop the mortgage market.

### **Mortgage Interest Rates**

58. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to protect current and prospective mortgage holders from a rise in European Central Bank interest rates; his views on the introduction of maximum interest rates that can be contracted to each type of credit agreement as applied in some other European Union countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9485/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The price lenders charge for their loans is a commercial matter for individual lenders. As Minister for Finance I cannot determine the lending policies of individual banks including the interest rates they charge for loans including mortgages.

Despite this, it should be noted that recent trends indicate that certain mortgage rates have been falling in Ireland. For example, the interest rates on new mortgages (excluding renegotiations) have fallen from 4.05% in December 2014 to 2.69% in December 2021.

The weighted average interest rate on new fixed rate mortgage agreements stood at 2.59% in December 2021, down from a series high of 4.11% in December 2014. There has also been a reduction in the interest rates charged on loans to SMEs and consumers over the same period.

The Central Bank also introduced a number of increased protections for variable rate mortgage holders. The enhanced measures, which are provided for in an Addendum to the Consumer Protection Code 2012, and became effective in February 2017, require lenders to explain to borrowers how their variable interest rates have been set, including in the event of an increase. The measures also improve the level of information required to be provided to borrowers on variable rates about other mortgage products their lender provides which could provide savings for the borrower and signpost the borrower to the CCPC's mortgage switching tool.

In addition, the Central Bank introduced changes to the Consumer Protection Code 2012 in June 2018 to help consumers make savings on their mortgage repayments, provide additional protections to consumers who are eligible to switch, and facilitate mortgage switching through enhancing the transparency of the mortgage framework. The new and enhanced requirements

took effect from January 2019.

In relation to the introduction of maximum interest rates that can be contracted to each type of credit agreement as applied in some other European Union countries, the Deputy should be aware that the Government intends to introduce shortly a Bill to cap interest rates from providers of moneylending agreements. In addition, the Government's Consumer Protection (Regulation of Retail Credit and Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2021, which is commencing Committee Stage this week, will put an existing APR cap of 23% for consumer lending on a solid statutory basis. This 23% APR cap will also apply to hire-purchase agreements.

Both these Bills, together with the existing interest rate cap on credit union credit, anticipate a draft provision in the European Commission's proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on consumer credits, which was published last June. The provision in question will require Member States to introduce caps on interest rates, annual percentage rate of charge and/or the total cost of credit to the consumer. This would apply to unsecured credit to a consumer up to a maximum of €100,000.

It is also worth noting that the review of the retail banking market which is now underway in my Department will consider how the banking system can best support economic activity, assess competition and consumer choice in the market for banking services and consider options to further develop the mortgage market.

*Question No. 59 answered with Question No. 55.*

*Question No. 60 answered with Question No. 24.*

## **Enterprise Policy**

61. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on the recently launched innovation seed fund programme; the types of companies and initiatives eligible for support under the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9702/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Irish Innovation Seed Fund Programme (IISF) is designed to provide seed venture capital to innovative Irish companies and is an important step in developing the Irish venture capital market. While the overall venture capital sector in Ireland is strong and continues to grow, there is a trend towards growth being driven by larger, later stage deals and investments. The Irish market is producing ambitious founders with strong technical expertise and a drive to innovate in much greater numbers, so the need to nurture seed and scaling activities in Ireland remains very important.

The €90m fund programme is made up of a €30m investment from the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE), through Enterprise Ireland (EI), which is matched by a €30m investment from the European Investment Fund (EIF). The €60m fund will be managed by EIF and the Irish Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) will co-invest a further €30m alongside on a deal by deal basis. Establishment of the fund programme enhances the growing relationship between Enterprise Ireland, the EIF and ISIF. The €90m fund programme will attract both new fund managers and new private investors and will crowd-in significant private investment.

The fund programme will operate as a "fund of funds", essentially a fund that invests in specialist fund managers, who then source companies with strong potential for a commercial return on investment. Ireland is lacking in this type of fund, so an additional benefit of this project is that the Irish equity investment ecosystem is further developed and matured.

All investments are expected to be made within a three-year timeframe. The investments are forecast to have a 10-year life. Investments will be targeted and prioritised in areas that have experienced difficulty in attracting investment, such as funds that invest in companies with a focus on regional development, climate change and female entrepreneurship.

There is no doubt that our most innovative, early stage firms have been affected by the more cautious investment environment which followed the uncertainty of a pandemic. SMEs make up over 99% of our firms and employ over one million people across our cities, towns and villages. They are the lifeblood of our economy and we will continue to depend on their innovations and successes to secure the future, sustained economic growth of our country.

*Question No. 62 answered with Question No. 23.*

### **Tax Code**

63. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered an index-linked approach to taxation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9685/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I assume that the Deputy is referring to indexation of the personal income tax system. As the Deputy may be aware, the Programme for Government states that “from Budget 2022 onwards, in the event that incomes are again rising as the economy recovers, credits and bands will be index linked to earnings. This will be done to prevent an increase in the real burden of income tax, to prevent more low income workers being taken into the tax net, and to ensure there is no increase in the number of people having to pay higher income tax and Universal Social Charge rates”.

Budget 2022 included an income tax package amounting to €520 million, which, within available resources, sought to index the income tax standard rate bands and main personal tax credits. The single income tax rate band was increased by 4.2 per cent from €35,300 to €36,800 for the 2022 tax year, with commensurate increases for persons who are married/in civil partnerships. The main tax credits, personal tax credits, employee tax credit and earned income credit, were also increased by just over 3 per cent from €1,650 to €1,700 for the 2022 tax year. This will provide a real benefit to all individuals who pay tax by reducing their tax liability and will ensure that some low and part time workers will remain outside income tax net.

The 2% rate band ceiling for USC was also increased in line with the increase in the national minimum wage to ensure that a full-time adult worker who benefits from the increase in the hourly minimum wage rate will remain outside the top rates of USC.

Having regard to the fiscal demands and pressures facing the State, it was not possible to index all elements of the personal income tax system nor was it possible to fully index tax credits and standard rate tax bands in line with expected earnings growth and remain within the fiscal parameters. However, the tax changes introduced in Budget 2022, will benefit all income earners who pay income tax.

I am aware that the Oireachtas Committee on Budgetary Oversight is currently undertaking work in relation to indexation of the taxation and social protection systems, and that my officials recently attended the Committee to assist the Members with their work in this regard. I understand that one of the key points to emerge from presentations made to the Committee is that, historically, changes to tax and welfare parameters have, on average, kept pace with earnings notwithstanding that we have not had in place a system of automatic indexation.

*Question No. 64 answered with Question No. 25.*

### **Film Industry**

65. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will clearly establish, through guidelines or in legislation, that film producer companies in receipt of section 481 film tax relief must take direct responsibility as the employers for all those working on section 481 supported film productions and end the situation in which they are denying this employer responsibility by hiding behind short-lived designated activity companies which are set up as accountancy tools for the duration of a film production and cease to exist shortly afterwards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9673/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 481 film relief is intended to act as a stimulus to the creation of an indigenous film industry in the State, creating quality employment opportunities and supporting the expression of the Irish culture. The scheme provides a 32% payable tax credit for eligible expenditure on film production in Ireland.

It is essential that employers in the audio-visual industry, as with all industries, comply with all applicable employment obligations including legislative obligations and policies. This is reflected in the section 481 certification process which was amended as part of Finance Act 2018. This process includes a requirement for applicant companies to complete an undertaking of quality employment, committing applicants to compliance with all relevant employment legislation. These conditions apply not only to the producer company but also to the qualifying company (or Designated Activity Company). The DAC is also required to remain in existence for a period of at least 12 months post the completion of a production.

It is also a requirement to provide information on any adverse decisions of the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) against the company or companies within the group. Should a producer company or qualifying company fail to adhere to a condition or obligation specified in a certificate, the Culture certificate may be rendered invalid and any credit claimed may be subject to recoupment by Revenue.

It should be noted that the monitoring of compliance with employment rights legislation is primarily a matter for the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment through the Workplace Relations Commission. The WRC is an independent statutory office mandated to secure compliance with Ireland's employment, equality and industrial relations legislation. As part of its statutory functions, the WRC adjudicates on cases with regard to employment rights, industrial relations and equal status legislation.

There are no plans to issue further guidelines at this point.

### **Tax Reliefs**

66. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications and the number of applications approved, respectively, under the help-to-buy scheme, by county, in each of the years from the introduction of the scheme to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3057/22]

76. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons who have received assistance under help-to-buy scheme since the start of 2021, by county; if he has plans to review or extend the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9687/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 66 and 76 together.

With regard to the Deputies' questions, I am advised by Revenue that there were 26,025 Help-to-Buy (HTB) applications made in 2021.

Applications for HTB may be made on a provisional basis as first time buyers will want to have certainty as to their entitlements in advance of commencing the purchase of a property. An application will only progress to the final 'claim' stage when the applicant decides to purchase a property that is eligible for the scheme. In 2021, 7,555 applications moved to this stage and were approved.

I am also advised by Revenue that the available information by county is the number of claims approved. The table below provides a county breakdown of approved claims by year since the introduction of the HTB, based on the claim stage start date. When there are fewer than ten cases in a county, the exact number is not provided due to Revenue's obligation to protect taxpayer confidentiality.

[[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\\_pq66-22-02-22\\_en.docx](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22_pq66-22-02-22_en.docx)] Assistance under help-to-buy scheme]

In relation to Deputy Carey's question concerning the future of the scheme, he will be aware that I previously announced that a formal review of the scheme would take place in 2022. The review will be fundamental in nature. By this I mean that all aspects will be examined including the design and operation of the scheme, its cost effectiveness and whether the policy aims of the measure could be better achieved by alternative means. In addition, it is likely that the review will look at the changed policy context of Help to Buy having regard to other initiatives in the same policy space which are committed to in the Housing for All strategy.

Issues related to the terms of reference and the procurement arrangements are being progressed by my Department at present and the matter is expected to be moved forward shortly.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

67. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if an update will be provided on the repayment of outstanding pandemic unemployment payment and temporary wage subsidy scheme tax liabilities; the amount repaid to date; the number of persons with an outstanding TWSS or PUP tax liability for 2020 who subsequently overpaid tax in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9482/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Deputy will be aware that the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) were not taxed in the normal real-time manner in 2020 and were instead taxed at year end. Where this resulted in an underpayment of tax after all tax credits and reliefs, for example health expenses, were allocated, the amount due could be collected, interest-free, over four years commencing on 1 January 2022.

As taxpayers' liabilities may have been reduced by these additional reliefs or credits, it is not possible to quantify the exact amounts repaid that related specifically to TWSS or PUP liabilities. Revenue has confirmed that, to date, almost 300,000 PAYE taxpayers who were in receipt of TWSS and/or PUP payments in 2020 have submitted income tax returns for that year and where liabilities arose, these were settled by immediate payment, by the employer paying the amount due on behalf of the employee, or by spreading the payment over four years.

Revenue has also confirmed that there are approximately 290,000 PAYE taxpayers that were in receipt of TWSS and/or PUP payments that have not yet filed an income tax return for 2020 and who may have a tax liability for that year. As previously outlined, this liability could be reduced depending on whether there are additional credits or reliefs to be claimed.

There are also 140,000 PAYE taxpayers who were in receipt of TWSS and/or PUP payments in 2020 who may have overpaid tax, but again this cannot be confirmed until they submit their income tax returns for that year. Approximately 80,000 PAYE taxpayers that received TWSS and/or PUP payments in 2020 paid the correct amount of tax.

To date, over 480,000 PAYE taxpayers have filed their tax returns for 2021 and a small proportion of these had tax liabilities in respect of 2020, which may or may not have arisen from PUP or TWSS payments.

### Inflation Rate

68. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he unilaterally or in conjunction with his European Union colleagues might seek to tackle inflation on a Europe-wide basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9486/22]

257. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he has had dialogue and or expects to so do in the future with his European Union counterparts regarding the Europe-wide threat of inflation and its possible consequences for European stability. [8371/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 68 and 257 together.

At both the ECOFIN and Eurogroup meetings, my fellow Ministers and I work alongside the European Commission and the European Central Bank to take stock of the latest economic situation, including inflation developments throughout the EU.

The latest *Eurostat* estimates point to euro area annual inflation of 5.1 per cent in January. This was largely driven by energy inflation, which increased by an estimated 29 per cent. Pandemic-related effects, such as the impact of temporary VAT reductions, and technical factors, such as measurement issues, added further volatility. Core inflation – which strips out energy and non-processed food inflation – was 2.5 per cent in January.

HICP inflation moderated slightly from 5.7 per cent to 5.0 per cent in Ireland in the same period.

The latest figures point to inflation, including energy prices, remaining high over the near-term, before gradually easing later this year. The ECB projects inflation to average 3.2 per cent this year but to decline to rates of 1.8 per cent in both 2023 and 2024. Both the Commission and the ECB are confident that elevated inflation is largely linked to temporary factors, including supply-side constraints and the recovery in demand as our economies reopen.

As the Deputy is aware, the ECB is an independent institution with a mandate to maintain price stability, defined as around 2 per cent over the medium-term. The ECB currently expects inflation to fall slightly below 2 per cent by end-2022.

That said, energy prices can entail wide-ranging consequences for inflation and raise costs for businesses and families. In recognition of these potential social impacts, many Member

States have introduced targeted measures to protect vulnerable households from energy poverty.

Ireland is one of these Member States. In framing *Budget 2022*, I was conscious of these cost of living pressures and announced a range of measures including targeted social welfare initiatives. Last week, Minister McGrath and I announced a suite of further supports to aid households and to target the main underlying problem – higher energy prices. This is in addition to the electricity credit for households announced late last year.

In addition, at an EU level, the Commission has issued a *Communication on Tackling Rising Energy Prices*, and the matter was discussed at various Council configurations. The Communication emphasises the broad nature of the impact and policy response.

In short, my fellow Finance Ministers and I all agree that this is an important issue and that we need to continue closely monitoring inflation and energy price developments and the potential implications for our economies.

### **Insurance Industry**

69. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance if an update will be provided on the work of the Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market since its establishment. [9495/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Insurance reform is a key priority for this Government as evidenced by the fact that implementation of the *Action Plan on Insurance Reform* is overseen by the Cabinet Sub-Group on insurance reform, chaired by the Tánaiste.

The establishment of the *Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market* is a Programme for Government commitment. This Office is situated within the Department of Finance and is chaired by Minister of State Fleming. Its aims are to help expand the risk appetite of existing insurers and explore opportunities for new market entrants in order to increase the availability of insurance.

Since its establishment, the Office has had over 60 meetings with a range of stakeholders, including insurance companies and representative organisations, on issues surrounding competition. Of recent significance, in late 2021 Minister Fleming met with the CEOs of the major insurance providers in Ireland, who have confirmed that they are committed to passing on savings from the new Personal Injury Guidelines, and other reforms, to customers. They also reiterated their support for the reform agenda and that they are adhering to the Guidelines in direct settlements with their clients.

Furthermore, the Office has also cooperated with the Central Bank to create a databank for new market entrants, which was launched on 8 February. This databank is anticipated to be an additional source of information for insurance providers who are considering entering the Irish market, as it provides quick access to key sources of information on insurance in Ireland, and sets out the high-quality work being done in data collection by the Central Bank, such as the National Claims Information Database (NCID). In addition, the Office is also actively working with IDA Ireland to help leverage the ongoing insurance reforms with the aim of targeting new entrants to the Irish market, or persuading current incumbents to expand their existing operations here.

In conclusion, this Government is committed to securing a more sustainable and competitive market through deepening and widening the supply of insurance in Ireland. In this regard, it is my intention to work with my Government colleagues to ensure implementation of the Ac-

tion Plan which should have a positive impact on the affordability and availability of insurance for all consumers.

### **Inflation Rate**

70. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the fact that while inflation and the cost of living increases currently taking place are severely impacting on ordinary workers and households, corporate profits continue to rise as they have done throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and over the last decade; his further views on whether new tax measures are needed to ensure that those that are doing well in the current environment contribute to easing the burden being imposed on the rest of society; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9674/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Government is conscious that the rising cost of inflation is putting significant financial pressure on households. In order to alleviate this pressure, last week, Minister McGrath and I announced a €505 million package of measures to mitigate the cost of living pressures faced by households. This is a suite of policy measures targeted at the main underlying problem - higher energy prices. The increase in energy prices is primarily due to external factors such as higher oil prices and pandemic-induced bottlenecks in key regions. The rapid rebound in the domestic economy is also a factor.

These measures come on top of the measures already announced in Budget 2022 to support households – such as increases in social welfare rates as well as increases in tax bands.

While it is expected that the inflation rate will moderate from the second quarter of this year, I believe that it is appropriate for Government to respond to the increase in prices and help our citizens meet the challenges presented by the current cost of living, and that is what we have done.

I acknowledge that some sectors of the economy continue to trade profitably and perhaps even have experienced increased demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all businesses, regardless of profitability, have faced additional costs in adapting to operate in accordance with public health guidelines – through the physical adaptation of premises to ensure social distancing, the provision of Personal Protective Equipment, and the facilitation of remote working.

We must acknowledge the important role played by innovative sectors of the economy. The growing digitalisation of business in recent years has allowed many parts of the economy to continue to function while others were forced to close. This has enabled home working and allowed trade in essential goods and services to continue. Furthermore, the fact that sectors of the economy have continued to function has allowed Governments to extend supports to other sectors of the economy that have fared less well, particularly in areas such as hospitality and retail.

As the Deputy will be aware, the trading profits of companies in Ireland are generally taxed at the standard Corporation Tax rate of 12.5%. Some of the main features of the current Corporation Tax regime are its simplicity and that it applies to a broad base.

Imposing additional taxes on certain sectors would involve increased complexity and could change the attractiveness of Ireland's corporate tax regime. While it is possible that imposing such taxes could lead to theoretical gains, it could also potentially lead to lower levels of economic activity and to companies passing the additional tax burden onto their staff, customers, suppliers or investors.

In addition it should be noted that Ireland's Corporation Tax regime has been undergoing a process of significant reform in recent years. The Deputy will be aware that, on 8 October 2021, Ireland joined 135 other member jurisdictions of the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework in reaching an historic two-pillar agreement to address the tax challenges that have arisen from digitalisation.

Pillar One will see a re-allocation of a portion of the income of very large companies from source jurisdictions to market jurisdictions. Pillar Two will introduce a global minimum effective tax rate of 15% on businesses with a global turnover of greater than €750 million annually.

Ireland has been constructively engaged with the Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) project from its outset in 2013 and we have diligently reformed our tax system to ensure that it is in line with emerging international norms.

In consideration of the need for certainty regarding our corporation tax regime, and acknowledgment of the significant amendments being made to corporation tax internationally, I do not believe it is appropriate to introduce any additional taxes or levies on companies at this time.

### **Tax Reliefs**

71. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Finance the latest figures available with respect to entrepreneur relief; the total tax expenditure forgone in that year; the average costs per claimant; the number of claims in excess of €1 million of relief; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9449/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware Section 597AA of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides that disposals of qualifying business assets (in most businesses but excluding those involving dealing in land or holding investments) by qualifying individuals are charged CGT at a rate of 10% up to a lifetime limit of €1 million in chargeable gains. To qualify, among other conditions, an individual must own at least 5% of the business and have spent a certain proportion of their time working in the business as a director or employee for three out of the previous five years, prior to disposal.

I am informed by Revenue that in respect of 2019, the most recent available year, the tax expenditure foregone for entrepreneurial relief was €94 million. The average cost per claimant was €96,600. The number of claims greater than €1 million was 189. It should be noted that claims can exceed €1 million in a year arising from spouses claiming the relief on a single return.

An external review by Indecon Consultants of the Revised CGT Entrepreneur Relief was published as part of the Budget 2020 documentation. While the Indecon review identified a number of possible amendments and improvements it also recommended retaining the relief. Retaining this relief ensures stability and consistency for businesses and individuals and allows them to plan and organise their affairs with a degree of certainty. However an evaluation before the end of 2024 (when the relief is due to expire) would allow consideration of the appropriate next steps for this relief.

### **Tax Exemptions**

72. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider making

tips received in the hospitality sector tax free; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9456/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** It is a general principle of taxation that, as far as possible, income from all sources should be subject to taxation. This is a well-established and broadly accepted principle.

Section 19 of the Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997, sets out that tax under Schedule E shall be charged in respect of every public office or employment of profit. Section 112 of the TCA 1997 brings into charge all salaries, fees, wages, perquisites or profits of any kind arising from an office or employment. Therefore, the long-standing position is that all tips, gratuities and service charges arising from an office or employment are chargeable to income tax under Schedule E in accordance with Section 112.

Gratuities from customers for example, service charges in hotels or tips in restaurants, paid to the employer and subsequently paid out to an employee should be included in pay for the income tax week or month in which they are paid out. These tips constitute pay for the purposes of the PAYE system. However, in a situation where an employee receives tips directly from customers, the employer is not obliged to operate PAYE and in that case, the tips and gratuities are fully taxable and should be included by the employee in his or her income tax return. It is important to point out that such tips constitute pay for the purposes of the PAYE system.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is progressing legislation on tips and gratuities and this legislation will prohibit the practise of using tips or gratuities to top up wages. It will also ensure that electronic tips and gratuities, which are much more common these days, have to be divided fairly and equitably among the staff. In addition, the legislation will provide transparency to customers so they will know what the policy is on tips and service charges, how they are managed and to whom they go.

For the reasons outlined in the opening paragraphs of my reply, I have no plans to amend the tax treatment of tips and gratuities.

*Question No. 73 answered with Question No. 27.*

## **Financial Services**

74. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance his views on legislating on reserve requirements for banks and credit unions. [9683/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Since the Financial and Banking crisis, a number of regulatory, supervisory and legislative changes have taken place at International, EU and domestic level to ensure a safer, more stable and resilient financial and banking sector. These changes include the implementation of revised capital requirements for banks under the Capital Requirements Directives and the Capital Requirements Regulation as amended.

Ireland's position is represented at EU Council negotiations by officials from my Department on these issues and is supported by expert analysis from a range of sources including the Central Bank of Ireland.

Specifically relating to the minimum reserve requirements for credit institutions, these are governed by the minimum reserve system which is set out in the Regulation (EU) 2021/378 of the European Central Bank of 22 January 2021 on the application of minimum reserve requirements. Banks and credit unions are within scope of this regulation.

Credit unions are also subject to statutory regulatory reserve requirements prescribed by the Central Bank under Section 45 of the Credit Union Act 1997, and the Credit Union Act 1997 (Regulatory Requirements) Regulations 2016 (the Credit Union Regulations). The minimum regulatory requirement of 10% that applies to Credit Unions is set by the Central Bank of Ireland as Regulator and is set out in Regulations and not Primary Legislation.

For ease of reference the full provision is set out in Regulation 4 of the Credit Union Regulations which provides that:

“(1) Subject to paragraph (2), a credit union shall establish and maintain a minimum regulatory reserve requirement of at least 10 per cent of the assets of the credit union

(2) A newly registered credit union shall establish and maintain an initial reserve requirement that: (a) is sufficient to meet the credit union’s anticipated growth over 3 years; (b) takes account of operating losses that can be expected to occur until the credit union reaches an operationally viable performance level; and (c) is at least equal to the greater of: (i) €10,000; or (ii) minimum regulatory reserve requirement specified in paragraph (1).”

### **Real Estate Investment Trusts**

75. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to review the current tax arrangements for real estate investment trusts and Irish real estate funds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9533/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** It should be noted that, as with investment vehicles generally, taxation in Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) and Irish Real Estate Funds (IREFs) occurs primarily at the level of the investor rather than within the investment vehicle. Additionally, both REITs and IREFs apply withholding taxes on distributions to investors to ensure collection of tax revenues.

Finance Act 2013 introduced the regime for the operation of REIT companies in Ireland. The purpose of the REIT regime is to allow for a collective investment vehicle which provides a comparable after-tax return to investors to direct investment in rental property, by eliminating the double layer of taxation at corporate and shareholder level which would otherwise apply. REITs are required to distribute 85% of all property income profits annually to investors. Dividend Withholding Tax (DWT) at a rate of 25% must be applied to these distributions, other than those distributed to certain limited classes of investors such as pensions and charities as they are more generally exempt from tax.

An IREF is an investment undertaking where 25% or more of the value of that undertaking is made up of Irish real estate assets. The legislation was introduced to address concerns raised regarding the use of collective investment vehicles by non-residents to invest in Irish property. Generally IREFs must deduct a 20% withholding tax on distributions to non-resident investors. Certain categories of investors such as pension funds, life assurance companies and other collective investment undertakings are generally exempt from having IREF withholding tax applied provided the appropriate declarations are in place. Irish resident investors may be subject to the investment undertakings exit tax, at a rate of 41%.

Officials in my Department produced a report on REITs and IREFs as respects their investment in the Irish property market in 2019. The report was presented to the Tax Strategy Group and provided a basis for policy discussions and for amendments which were introduced in Finance Act 2019 to strengthen the regimes.

In relation to REITs, Finance Act 2019 extended the obligation to deduct DWT to include distributions of the proceeds of capital disposals. In addition, the deemed disposal provisions upon cessation of REIT status were restricted to REITs that have been in operation for at least 15 years, in line with the regime's stated objective of encouraging long-term, stable investment in rental property. In relation to IREFs, amendments were made in Finance Act 2019 to prevent the use of excessive debt and other payments to reduce distributable profits, and to prevent the avoidance of tax on gains on the redemption of IREF units. These amendments were made to ensure appropriate levels of tax are paid by investors in Irish property.

There are currently no plans to conduct a further review the tax treatment of REITs or IREFs. However officials in my Department and the Revenue Commissioners monitor the taxation of IREFs and REITs on an ongoing basis and, should additional issues be identified, I will take further action as necessary.

*Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 66.*

### **Tax Credits**

77. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Finance when the next departmental tax expenditure evaluation will be published on the research and development tax credit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9677/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Research and Development (R&D) tax credit allows companies to claim a 25% tax credit in respect of expenditure incurred on qualifying R&D activities.

It is intended for a review of the R&D tax credit to take place during 2022, alongside an evaluation of the Knowledge Development Box (KDB). My officials plan to facilitate public consultation and stakeholder engagement during the review process.

The review will consider the potential impact of the agreement reached at the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on BEPS on the R&D tax credit, particularly the Pillar 2 global anti-base erosion (GloBE) rules. It will also have regard to any elements of the ongoing process of international tax reform which may be of relevance to the credit.

The review will inform any policy considerations to be undertaken in advance of Budget 2023, and it is therefore intended that the review will be published on or before Budget Day, this October.

The Deputy may also be interested in Revenue's published information in respect of the research and development tax credit, which is available at: [www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/r-and-d-tax-credit-statistics.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/r-and-d-tax-credit-statistics.pdf).

### **Insurance Industry**

78. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance the number of meetings, discussions and telephone calls that he, the Minister of State, special advisers and officials in his Department have had with a company (details supplied) since June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9480/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As part of his role as Chair of the *Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market*, Minister of State Fleming has had a

wide-ranging series of engagements with stakeholders across the insurance industry, including providers, state bodies and representative groups. The Office has had more than 60 meetings since its establishment.

As part of this work, in late 2021 Minister Fleming met with the CEOs of the major insurance companies in Ireland, including the one identified by the Deputy. A number of issues were discussed with the firm, including the implementation of the new Personal Injury Guidelines; business interruption insurance developments; and an expansion of its risk appetite to other areas. In addition, officials and Minister Fleming's advisor directly contacted the company in question in relation to the logistics involved in setting up this meeting.

*Questions Nos. 79 and 80 answered with Question No. 14.*

### **Insurance Industry**

81. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance the status of progress made under the Action Plan for Insurance Reform; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9474/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Cabinet Committee Sub-Group on Insurance Reform, which oversees the *Action Plan for Insurance Reform*, met earlier this month to assess the work completed during 2021, and to look ahead to the priorities for 2022. It is anticipated that the second Implementation Report will be brought to Government by An Tánaiste very shortly and published thereafter. That report will show that the majority of the 66 reforms being delivered under this agenda are now complete, including many principal actions. Key reforms to date include:

- the publication of the General Scheme of a Bill to enhance and reform the *Personal Injuries Assessment Board* (PIAB);
- the launch of a databank for new entrants by the Central Bank of Ireland;
- the establishment of the *Insurance Fraud Co-ordination Office* within the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau;
- the publication of the Final Report of the Central Bank's *Review of Differential Pricing in the Motor and Home Insurance Markets*;
- the expansion of the *National Claims Information Database* to gather data on employers' and public liability insurance, and the publication of the first report on same;
- the publication of the Central Bank's third *National Claims Information Database* report on private motor insurance;
- the enactment of the *Criminal Justice (Perjury and Related Offences) Act 2021*;
- the implementation of the *Personal Injuries Guidelines*;
- the creation of the *Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market*; and
- the introduction of new regulations on solicitors advertising

In addition, my officials are continuing to advance the *Insurance (Miscellaneous Provision) Bill*, to address a number of separate, but related issues that complement the Action Plan. This is expected to be published in the coming weeks, and we will be seeking to have it prioritised for

passage through the Oireachtas.

The focus of the Sub-Group now is on implementing the outstanding reforms as soon as possible, with particular regard to:

- reforming the law on occupier's liability to rebalance the duty of care;
- enhancing the enforcement powers of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission through the Competition Amendment Bill; and
- reforming the PIAB, with a view to increasing the number of cases settled by the Board

Overall, it is felt that the range of measures being pursued under the Action Plan will lead to an improvement in the insurance market. Throughout 2022, both Minister of State Fleming and I will continue our widespread engagement with industry and other stakeholders to ensure that the benefits of these reforms are being passed on and are felt, first and foremost, by policyholders.

*Question No. 82 answered with Question No. 55.*

### **Enterprise Policy**

83. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the sectors that will be able to avail of funding from the Irish Innovation Seed Fund Programme; and the funding allocated or ring-fenced for any of strategic opportunities. [9986/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Irish Innovation Seed Fund Programme (IISF) is designed to provide seed venture capital to innovative Irish companies and is an important step in developing the Irish venture capital market. While the overall venture capital sector in Ireland is strong and continues to grow, there is a trend towards growth being driven by larger, later stage deals and investments. The Irish market is producing ambitious founders with strong technical expertise and a drive to innovate in much greater numbers, so the need to nurture seed and scaling activities in Ireland remains very important.

The €90m fund programme is made up of a €30m investment from the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE), through Enterprise Ireland (EI), which is matched by a €30m investment from the European Investment Fund (EIF). The €60m fund will be managed by EIF. The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) will seek to co-invest a further €30m alongside on a deal by deal basis.

Establishment of the fund programme enhances the growing relationship between Enterprise Ireland, the EIF and ISIF. The €90m fund programme will attract both new fund managers and new private investors and will crowd-in significant private investment.

All investments are expected to be made within a three-year timeframe. The investments are forecast to have a 10-year life. Investments will be targeted and prioritised in areas that have experienced difficulty in attracting investment, such as funds that invest in companies with a focus on regional development, climate change and female entrepreneurship.

There is no doubt that our most innovative, early stage firms have been affected by the more cautious investment environment which followed the uncertainty of a pandemic. SMEs make up over 99% of our firms and employ over one million people across our cities, towns and villages. They are the lifeblood of our economy and we will continue to depend on their innovations and successes to secure the future, sustained economic growth of our country.

### Departmental Data

84. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Taoiseach the number of companies that have an annual turnover of less than €750,000. [9748/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Central Statistics Office's Structural Business Statistics (SBS) publishes annual statistics on enterprise characteristics including turnover. The latest SBS results show that there were 285,466 enterprises in the business economy in 2019. Of these, 244,510 enterprises had annual turnover less than €750,000.

The following table shows the breakdown of these figures by sector in 2019.

#### Total enterprises and percentage of enterprises with turnover less than €750,00 in 2019

Sector	Enterprises with turnover less than \$750,000	All enterprises	% with turnover less than €750,000
Mining and Quarrying	317	451	70.3%
Manufacturing	13,228	16,461	80.4%
Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning	434	663	65.5%
Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation Activities	803	1,024	78.4%
Construction	53,594	59,175	90.6%
Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles	31,758	46,786	67.9%
Transportation and Storage	23,293	24,851	93.7%
Accommodation and Food Service Activities	16,399	19,418	84.5%
Information and Communication	14,301	16,418	87.1%
Real Estate Activities	15,276	15,788	96.8%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	40,806	45,161	90.4%
Administrative and Support Service Activities	13,892	18,097	76.8%

Sector	Enterprises with turnover less than \$750,000	All enterprises	% with turnover less than €750,000
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	4,493	5,007	89.7%
Other Service Activities	15,916	16,166	98.5%
All Enterprises	244,510	285,466	85.7%

### Departmental Data

85. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Taoiseach the estimated number of companies that have fewer than 20 employees. [9749/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Central Statistics Office's Structural Business Statistics (SBS) publishes annual statistics on enterprise characteristics including employee numbers. The latest SBS results show that there were 285,466 enterprises in the business economy in 2019. Of these, 273,829 enterprises had less than 20 employees.

It should be noted that a large portion of the business economy is made up of sole traders and proprietors with zero employment. In 2019, 150,966 enterprises had zero employees.

The following table shows the breakdown of these figures by sector in 2019.

### Total enterprises and percentages of enterprises with less than 20 employees, 2019

Sector	Enterprises with < 20 employees	All Enterprises	% with < 20 employees
MINING AND QUARRYING	413	451	91.6%
MANUFACTURING	14,978	16,461	91.0%
ELECTRICITY, GAS, STEAM AND AIR CONDITIONING SUPPLY	652	663	98.3%
WATER SUPPLY; SEWERAGE, WASTE MANAGEMENT AND REMEDIATION ACTIVITIES	929	1,024	90.7%
CONSTRUCTION	58,283	59,175	98.5%
WHOLESALE AND RETAIL TRADE; REPAIR OF MOTOR VEHICLES AND MOTOR-CYCLES	43,674	46,786	93.3%
TRANSPORTATION AND STORAGE	24,268	24,851	97.7%
ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICE ACTIVITIES	17,256	19,418	88.9%
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	15,620	16,418	95.1%

Sector	Enterprises with < 20 employees	All Enterprises	% with < 20 employees
REAL ESTATE ACTIVITIES	15,636	15,788	99.0%
PROFESSIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL ACTIVITIES	44,177	45,161	97.8%
ADMINISTRATIVE AND SUPPORT SERVICE ACTIVITIES	17,215	18,097	95.1%
ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT AND RECREATION	4,695	5,007	93.8%
OTHER SERVICE ACTIVITIES	16,033	16,166	99.2%
TOTAL	273,829	285,466	95.9%

### Work Permits

86. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of work permits in the case of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9113/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Employment Permits Section of my Department inform me that General Employment Permit applications for the persons concerned (details supplied) were received on dates between 22 December 2021 and 20 January 2022.

The Employment Permits Section of my Department are currently processing standard applications received on 27 September 2021.

Applicants can keep track of Employment Permit applications current processing dates at [enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Current-Application-Processing-Dates/](https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Current-Application-Processing-Dates/)

The Department is very conscious of the lengthening of timeframes for processing employment permit applications and is committed to reducing these further. A plan of action has been developed and is being implemented to reduce processing times, with both human resource interventions and systemic changes. It advises employers to take the current timelines into account as part of their recruitment plans.

### International Agreements

87. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the stakeholder consultation of his Department on the International Labour Organisation Convention 190, Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work is due to commence. [9042/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Ratification of ILO Convention C190, Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, a matter of priority for Ireland, is being considered in the context of our standard approach to the ratification of international instruments. Ireland does not ratify international conventions until it has been determined that national law is in line with the provi-

sions of the international instrument.

Convention 190 is the first ever international instrument on the very important issues of eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work. Ireland already has very strong protections in law to combat violence and harassment in the world of work and has ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence - that is, the Istanbul Convention.

Officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment have engaged with all relevant Government Departments and offices to establish the extent to which domestic legislative provisions already provide for the rights and entitlements included in the Convention, as well as legislative amendments, if any, that may be required to enable ratification.

The Department is conducting an analysis of the outcomes and engaging with legal advisers to ensure that there are no gaps.

Following this consideration, as part of the ratification process, my Department will undertake a stakeholder consultation with trade unions, employer representative bodies and other interested parties.

I wish to reassure the Deputy of Ireland's commitment to work towards being amongst the first ILO member States to ratify Convention 190.

### **Protected Disclosures**

88. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to serious concerns over the perceived failure of the Health and Safety Authority to respond to protected disclosures made in relation to dangerous work practices; and the steps he is taking to ensure that protected disclosures are dealt with in a prompt and serious manner. [9314/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Protected Disclosures Act 2014 protects workers in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors from retaliation if they speak up about wrongdoing in the workplace. Persons who make protected disclosures are protected by law and should not be treated unfairly or lose their job because they have made a protected disclosure.

The Health and Safety Authority has systems and procedures in place for addressing complaints and protected disclosures received, including the initiation of an inspection or investigation where appropriate. Information on its protected disclosure process is published on its website at [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)

I have been assured by the Health and Safety Authority that it responds and follows up on all protected disclosures which fall within their remit.

Public Bodies are also required to publish a report on the number of protected disclosures made to the public body in the preceding year and the action taken (if any) in response to the protected disclosures. In 2021, the Chief Executive of the Health and Safety Authority, in the context of her role as a prescribed person under the Protected Disclosures Act 2014, received 11 protected disclosures from parties external to the Health and Safety Authority and relating to third parties. All disclosures were referred to inspectors for investigation. Four of the disclosures have been closed out and the rest remain under investigation.

The Health and Safety Authority does not comment on the content or nature of disclosures received and carries out its obligations under the Protected Disclosures Act independently of the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

### **Departmental Advertising**

89. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount that his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9572/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department has paid for neither advertising nor features in Public Sector Magazine.

### **Enterprise Support Services**

90. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the funding that is available for a physical therapy, health and well-being start-up business; if low-interest loans or grants are available for this type of business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9603/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Anyone considering starting, expanding or pivoting their business should in the first instance contact their Local Enterprise Office which acts as a ‘first stop shop’ for all available Government business supports.

Businesses operating in the area of health and wellbeing, including those involved in physical therapy, are largely excluded from direct grant-aid support as the funding of such businesses may give rise to the displacement of existing businesses.

Nevertheless, the Local Enterprise Offices do provide a wide range of high-quality business and management development programmes that are tailored to meet specific business requirements. Whether it is starting a business or growing a business there is something suitable for anyone wishing to start or advance their entrepreneurial journey.

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

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

I would also suggest seeking the advice of a LEO Business Mentor; the Mentor programme is open to both new and existing businesses located within the Local Enterprise Office region and is designed to match up the knowledge, skills, insights and entrepreneurial capability of experienced business practitioners with small business owner/ managers who need practical and strategic one to one advice and guidance.

The mentor contributes independent, informed observation and advice to aid decision making. Mentors can also advise on finance options available to entrepreneurs and can assist with applications and referrals to Micro-Finance Ireland, which provides vital support to eligible microenterprises by lending to businesses that cannot obtain loans from other commercial lend-

ers and who do not meet the conventional risk criteria applied by commercial lenders. It offers loan funding, including Start-up Loans, from €5,000 to €25,000.

### **Industrial Development**

91. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the up-to-date position regarding the commencement of operations at a facility (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9620/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Central Pharma took a long-term lease on the Advance Technology Building in Tralee. I understand the company subsequently experienced delays in progressing its plans in part due to Covid-19 restrictions preventing work on site from commencing.

I am told Central Pharma's total investment into the facility to date (including construction, rent and salaries paid) is approximately €1.1m. The company obtained three key licensing approvals from the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), concluding in September 2021.

I have been informed that Central Pharma is currently recruiting for a production manager and is still planning to commence production activities in Q1 2022. Central Pharma has recruited a Head of Warehousing and a Business Development Specialist and plans to add production employees over the first three months of operations.

### **Industrial Development**

92. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the up-to-date position regarding the provision of a facility (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9621/22]

93. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if consideration has been given to the possible provision of a facility (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9622/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 92 and 93 together.

IDA Ireland is committed to building a new Advanced Technology Building in Tralee. I am advised that the IDA is continuing to engage with stakeholders to seek a suitable site for this proposed building. Securing planning permission and the construction of the building will take time, but it is intended that the building will be delivered during the life of the current IDA Strategy to 2024. The advanced technology building may support either a new office or industrial investment given the flexible nature of IDA buildings.

There are no plans at this time for additional advance buildings in Kerry beyond what is outlined in the Strategy.

The 2021-2024 Strategy also states that IDA will continue to work closely with the private sector to secure the provision of appropriate and cost-effective building and property solutions for client companies and also that additional upgrade works and investment are planned for IDA Parks in the region.

IDA Ireland continues to engage with new companies on promoting Ireland as a location for their business and the Agency will continue to position County Kerry for virtual and in-person site visits over 2022 and beyond.

*Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 92.*

### Departmental Data

94. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of private companies limited by shares, designated activity companies, public limited companies, companies limited by guarantee and unlimited companies, respectively, that are currently incorporated in Ireland under the Companies Act 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9744/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** I have been informed by the Registrar of Companies that the information sought by the Deputy is as follows.

Company Type	Number
LTD – Private Company Limited by Shares	243,584
Designated Activity Companies	6,362
PLC - Public Limited Companies	925
Companies Limited by Guarantee	17,691
Unlimited Company	5,111

### Departmental Data

95. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of collective asset management vehicles and undertakings for collective investment in transferable securities that are currently authorised, registered or incorporated in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9745/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** I am advised that the Register of Irish Collective Asset Management Vehicles (ICAVs) is maintained by the Central Bank of Ireland and questions about this Register can be directed to the Minister for Finance. The Companies Registration Office (CRO) is required to de-register companies who have registered as ICAVs with the Central Bank. During 2021 one such company was de-registered by the CRO for this reason. Undertakings for Collective Investment in Transferable Securities (UCITS) are registered by the CRO and file their annual returns with the Central Bank. I understand that there are currently 172 UCITS registered with the CRO.

### Departmental Data

96. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of companies that are currently incorporated in Ireland under the Companies Act 2014 which have a single director; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9746/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** I have been informed by the Registrar of Companies that there are 72,325 com-

panies on the register that have a single director.

### **Departmental Data**

97. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of companies currently incorporated that are considered to be a micro company as defined in the Companies Act 2014; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9747/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** I have been informed by the Registrar of Companies that of the companies on the register, 82,910 have identified themselves as micro companies.

### **Employment Rights**

98. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will examine the current situation regarding the payment of private security personnel, the quashing of the Workplace Relations Commission award and the pressing need for a sectoral pay order. [9781/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** On 28 April 2021, I announced my intention to issue an Order to give effect to a statutory recommendation of the Labour Court concerning minimum rates of remuneration and other terms and conditions in the Security Sector. The Order was to apply from 1 September 2021.

As the Deputy may be aware, an ex-parte application to initiate legal proceedings challenging the underlying legislation in the High Court was lodged in late July. As part of the proceedings, the High Court placed a Stay on making the Order.

Following a settlement of the High Court challenge, the draft Employment Regulation Order (ERO) for the sector has been quashed and was remitted back to the Labour Court in January 2022 for their consideration.

I am aware that the Labour Court hearing on the Security ERO is scheduled for March 21 next.

### **Work Permits**

99. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will consider removing the restrictions regarding work permits that limit those in receipt of the permits to only accept work from limited industries given that this limitation is currently preventing persons (details supplied) from taking up work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9805/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Ireland operates a managed employment permits system which maximises the benefits of economic migration while minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The system is intended to act as a conduit for key skills which are required to develop enterprise in the State for the benefit of our economy, while simultaneously protecting the bal-

ance of the labour market. The system is, by design, vacancy led and driven by the changing needs of the labour market, expanding and contracting in tandem with its inherent fluctuations.

The State's general policy is to promote the sourcing of labour and skills needs from within the workforce of the State and other EEA states. Where specific skills prove difficult to source within the State and EEA, an employment permit may be sought by an employer to hire a non-EEA national.

All employment permits granted are employer and employee specific and therefore cannot be transferred from one employer to another. This means that if a permit holder ceases employment with a company or is made redundant, they must obtain a new employment permit before entering a new employment.

When an employment permit holder is made redundant from their employment, they are required to notify the Employment Permits Section of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment within 4 weeks of the redundancy date on the prescribed Redundancy Notification form, available on the Department's website.

By Completing the Redundancy Notification Form appropriately, an employment permit holder has up to six months from the date on which their employment ceases to find another job. The new permit application is exempt from certain rules that would otherwise apply including the requirement to complete a Labour Market Needs Test in respect of a new application for a General Employment Permit in respect of a new job offer.

Occupations included on the Ineligible List are occupations where there is evidence that there are more than enough Irish/EEA workers available to fill such vacancies, and therefore an employment permit shall not be granted in Ireland. Every other job in the labour market, where an employer cannot find a worker, may be eligible for an employment permit.

In cases of redundancy, if the permit holder is in an occupation which is now ineligible for the type of employment permit held, and they are offered the same job by a different employer, an employment permit application will still be considered for the same employment permit type.

The redundancy waivers for permit holders who have been made redundant are valid for a period of 6 months from the date of redundancy. Details in relation to permit holders being made redundant can be accessed on the Department's website through this link:- [enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Redundancy/](http://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Redundancy/)

Information is also provided on the Department's website in respect of all employment permits including information regarding to each permit type, Checklist documents for a General Employment Permits and an FAQ document which answers the majority of the most common questions, all of which are available through this link – [enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/](http://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/)

Information in relation to changing employers is available on the Department's website and can be accessed through the following link:- [enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Changing-Employer/](http://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/Changing-Employer/).

## **Public Services Provision**

100. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so,

when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9830/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department has not won any award from the publication in question.

### **Company Law**

101. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the measures that he plans to introduce to clearly define the functions and responsibilities of public interest directors and any directors of incorporated bodies appointed by a Minister, a chief executive of a local authority or by the members of a local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9940/22]

102. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the fiduciary responsibilities of persons appointed by a Minister, a chief executive of a local authority or by the members of a local authority to be directors of incorporated bodies; if he is satisfied that the Companies Act 2014 adequately provides for such in respect of these public appointments; if so, if such includes a fiduciary responsibility to the appointing authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9941/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 101 and 102 together.

The Companies Act 2014 sets out a comprehensive code of director's duties.

Any director of a company that comes within scope of the Act, regardless of whether or not they are a State appointed director, is subject to the requirements of company law to act in what he or she believes to be in the interests of the company to which they are appointed. These are the director's fiduciary duties which are owed to the company. Section 228 of the Companies Act 2014 sets out the principal fiduciary duties of directors which are to:

- act in good faith in what the director considers to be the interest of the company;
- act honestly and responsibly in relation to the conduct of the affairs of the company;
- act in accordance with the company's constitution and exercise his or her powers only for the purposes allowed by law;
- not benefit from or use the company's property, information or opportunities for his or her own or anyone else's benefit unless the company's constitution permits it or a resolution is passed in a general meeting;
- not agree to restrict the director's power to exercise an independent judgment unless this is expressly permitted by the company's constitution;
- avoid any conflict between the director's duties to the company and the director's other interests unless the director is released from his or her duty to the company in relation to the matter concerned;
- exercise the care, skill and diligence which would be reasonably expected of a person in the same position with similar knowledge and experience as a director.

Where a director of a company acts in breach of his or duty, he or she may be liable to indemnify the company for any loss or damage arising from that breach.

### **Equal Opportunities Employment**

103. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he remains satisfied that the public and private sectors in Ireland have adequate access to work opportunities under European Union single market standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9943/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** Ireland has a comprehensive body of employment legislation, in respect of which the Workplace Relations Commission is mandated to secure compliance.

Ireland's employment rights legislation protects all employees, including migrant workers, who are legally employed on a contract of service basis. This is specifically set out in Section 20 of the Protection of Employees (Part Time Work) Act 2001.

The evolution of the main elements of labour law in Ireland relating to employment rights, employment protection and non-discrimination, reflects, at the national level, a strong focus on the enactment of legislation based on clearly identified needs, in addition to those arising from wider European Union developments.

A "posted worker" is an employee who is sent by his/ her employer to carry out a service in another EU Member State on a temporary basis. Council Directive 96/71/EC defines a posted worker as a 'person who, for a limited period of time, carries out his or her work in the territory of an EU Member State other than the State in which he or she normally works'. If an Irish worker is posted to another EEA country they are protected under this directive, which was transposed into Irish Law by the Protection of Employees (Part Time Work Act) 2001.

Where an individual believes they are being deprived of employment rights applicable to employees they may refer a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) where the matter can be dealt with by way of mediation or adjudication leading to a decision that is enforceable through the District Court. WRC inspectors can also be asked to investigate certain breaches.

### **Departmental Communications**

104. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9957/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I do not use WhatsApp on my Department issued mobile phone. I do have WhatsApp on my personal phone but do not use it for Government business.

### **Departmental Bodies**

105. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of vacant positions, by job title, currently in Enterprise Ireland; and when

each of the vacancies will be filled, in tabular form. [10069/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Enterprise Ireland have the following vacancies. Note that Enterprise Ireland have approximately 846 staff.

**Enterprise Ireland Vacancies**

Job Title	No of vacant positions	When vacancies will be filled
Ireland Based Posts		
Executive Assistant	9.5	Q1/Q2 - 2022
Assistant IT Specialist	2	Q2 - 2022
Administrator - Investment Services	1	Q2 - 2022
Assistant Development Adviser – Entrepreneurship & HPSU Operations	1	Q2 - 2022
Administrator – Business Operations	2	Q2 - 2022
Administrator – Retail, Consumer & Online	1	Q2 - 2022
Executive – Corporate Services	4	Q2 - 2022
HR Specialist - Human Resources	2	Q2 - 2022
Executive - Business Operations	5	Q1/Q2 - 2022
Executive – Climate & Sustainability	1	Q2 - 2022
Legal Executive - Investment Services	1	Q2 - 2022
Senior Investment Adviser - Investment Services	3	Q2 - 2022
Senior Executive - Client Services	1	Q2 - 2022
Senior Executive - Business Operations	2	Q2 - 2022
Senior Development Advisers - Industrial & Lifesciences	2	Q2 - 2022
Senior Executive - Organisation Development	1	Q2 - 2022
Senior Executive - Global Procurement	1	Q2 - 2022
Senior Executive - Research & Innovation	2	Q2 - 2022
Senior Technologist - Lifesciences	1	Q2 - 2022
Senior Executive - Regions & Local Enterprise	1	Q2 - 2022
Senior Executive - Retail, Consumer & Online	1	Q2 - 2022
Department Manager, Retail, Consumer & Online	1	Q1 - 2022
Senior Principal Scientific Officer	1	Q2 - 2022
Overseas based posts		
Executive Assistant - Eurozone	1	Q2 - 2022
Market Adviser - Americas	2	Q2 - 2022
Market Adviser - France	1	Q2 - 2022
Market Adviser - UK	1	Q2 - 2022

Job Title	No of vacant positions	When vacancies will be filled
Senior Market Adviser - Americas	8	Q2 - 2022
Senior Market Adviser - UK	2	Q2 - 2022
Senior Market Adviser - Asia Pacific	1	Q2 - 2022
Senior Market Adviser - Middle East & India	4	Q2 - 2022
Manager, India	1	Q2 - 2022
Manager, Brussels	1	Q2 - 2022

### Departmental Bodies

106. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of vacant positions, by job title, currently in IDA Ireland; and when each of the vacancies will be filled, in tabular form. [10070/22]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** IDA Ireland have the following vacancies. Note that IDA Ireland have approximately 355 staff.

#### IDA Ireland Vacancies

Job Title	No of vacant positions	When it is expected that vacancies will be filled
Technologist	1	Qtr 2, 2022
Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Regional Business Development Manager	1	Qtr 2, 2022
Regional Business Development Manager	1	Qtr 2, 2022
Sales & Marketing Executive	1	Qtr 2, 2022
Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Technologist	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Sales & Marketing Executive	1	awaiting sanction
Assistant Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Overseas Territory Director	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Property Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Property Manager	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Network Administrator	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Executive Assistant	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Strategic Policy Manager	1	Qtr 1, 2022
IT Security Manager	1	Qtr 2, 2022
Project Manager	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Assistant Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Sales & Marketing Executive	1	awaiting sanction
Sales & Marketing Executive	1	awaiting sanction

Job Title	No of vacant positions	When it is expected that vacancies will be filled
Market Analyst	1	awaiting sanction
Assistant Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Assistant Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Sales & Marketing Executive	1	awaiting sanction
Sales & Marketing Executive	1	awaiting sanction
IT Manager	1	Qtr 1, 2022
Assistant Project Executive	1	Qtr 1, 2022

### EU Directives

107. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the European Commission enforcement case (2012) 4028 regarding Ireland's alleged failure to transpose and apply the access to justice provisions of Directives 2010/75/EU and 2011/92/EU; and if he will include a report on the origins of the case and the most recent correspondence with the European Commission on the matter [9845/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The European Commission issued a Letter of Formal Notice (Case 2012/4228) on 31 May 2012. This infringement remains open, but has not been escalated to reasoned opinion stage by the Commission. The most recent written correspondence from the Commission relating to this infringement was dated 6 February 2019, to which Ireland responded on 26 April 2019. The infringement was also discussed with the Commission in November last year at a Package Meeting chaired by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

### EU Directives

108. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the timeline for an amendment to the Building Control Acts to allow for the transposition into law of Article 8 of the Broadband Cost Reduction Directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9887/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is engaging with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the necessary measures to transpose this outstanding provision, in order that they can be finalised as a matter of urgency.

### Litter Pollution

109. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of litter fines that have been issued for each local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2021 and to date in 2022; and the number of fines that have been paid in each local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form. [9922/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is responsible for setting the policy and legislative framework within which local authorities discharge their functions under the Litter Pollution and Waste Management Acts.

Questions in relation to the number of litter fines imposed, revenues raised through the imposition of litter fines for specific offences and prosecutions taken by individual local authorities should be directed towards those specific authorities.

### **Litter Pollution**

110. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of fines that have been issued for dog littering in each local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2021 and to date in 2022; and the number of fines that have been paid in tabular form. [9923/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Enforcement actions against illegal waste and littering activity, including dog littering, are a matter for local authorities.

Questions in relation to the number of litter fines imposed, and revenues raised through the imposition of litter fines for littering offences in individual authorities can be directed towards those specific authorities.

### **Waste Management**

111. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he plans to notify local authorities of the extension to the granting of permits to burn green waste on farms, given that Tipperary County Council is yet to receive this notice, in order to allow farmers to avail of this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9046/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Statutory Instrument No. 51 of 2022 -Waste Management (Prohibition of Waste Disposal by Burning) (Amendment) Regulations 2022- was published on 11th February. The Regulations extend the exemption to the prohibition on the burning of domestic waste and allows farmers, as a last resort, to dispose by burning of waste generated by agricultural practice. This is the fifth extension to the exemption and will run until 1 January 2023. Discussions will shortly commence between officials from my Department and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to come up with alternatives to this practice and I therefore anticipate that this will be the final extension of the exemption.

All Local Authorities were notified of the extension of the exemption by circular letter on 15th February.

### **Waste Management**

112. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if there are regulations in place which stop farmers removing waste from buildings (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9086/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The Waste Management Act states that a person may not: - Cause or facilitate the abandonment, dumping or unauthorised management or treatment of waste, or

- Hold, transport, recover or dispose of waste, or treat waste, in a manner that causes or is likely to cause environmental pollution.

The enforcement of waste legislation is a statutory function of local authorities. Under section 60(3) of the Waste Management Act, the Department of Environment, Climate & Communications is precluded from the exercise of any power or control in relation to the performance in particular circumstances of the statutory functions of a local authority, therefore I would suggest that the Deputy contact the local authority concerned in this case.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

113. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the provision of fibre broadband to a property (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9127/22]

**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. 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.

With regard to the commercial operator referred to in the Question, the provision of telecommunication services is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator. As set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of all parts of our country, socially and economically. Facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities is essential for addressing climate change, adapting in an evolving economy, and competing internationally. A combination of commercial investment and the State led National Broadband Plan intervention will ensure access to high speed broadband in every part of the country no matter how remote.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 11 February, over 300,000 have been surveyed or have survey underway, with over 157,000 premises constructed or under construction across all counties. NBI has also advised that premises are connected in 16 counties; Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Kildare, Laois, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, Wexford and Wicklow and over 54,500 premises are available to order and pre-order across 21 counties. In County Clare surveying is complete in the Deployment Areas of Feakle and Corofin, which includes the premises referred to in the question, and main works are underway in the Deployment Area of Kilkishen. To date almost 8,000 premises in County Clare have been surveyed, with over 3,500 premises under construction and over 1,500 premises now available to order or pre-order.

Further details are available on specific areas within County Clare 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.

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 11 February 2022, 486 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. In County Clare 7 BCP's have been installed to date, including Obair Family Centre which is approximately 14.3km from the premises referred to. Further details can be found at [nbi.ie/bcp-locations/](http://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/).

In County Clare 12 schools have been installed by NBI to date 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. Further details of schools in scope are available on the NBI website at [nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/](http://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/).

### Environmental Schemes

114. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of the drawdown of the €100 million allocated to investment in residential and community energy efficiency further to the allocation of carbon tax expenditures provided in table 1 of the budget 2021 document, the Use of Carbon Tax Funds 2021; if any of these funds were surrendered back to the Exchequer at the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9134/22]

168. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount of funding allocated for retrofitting schemes that was unspent in 2021; if the funding was carried over for schemes in 2022; if not, if it has been used for other purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10001/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan)(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos.114 and 168 together.

The capital allocation for the residential and community retrofit schemes in 2021 was €221.5m, details of which are set out in the table below. This figure included €100m from the proceeds of the 2021 increase in carbon tax and €13m in continued carbon tax investment from 2020.

Scheme	€m
Better Energy - Homes	31.5
Better Energy - Warmer Homes	100.0
Better Energy - Warmth and Wellbeing	9.0
Deep Retrofit Pilot	3.4
Better Energy - Communities	30.0
Solar PV	8.0
Community Activation Fund	10.0
BER Supports	2.5
One Stop Shop	27.1

Expenditure in 2021 on the retrofit schemes was lower than allocations at €101.3m, main-

ly due to the impact of Covid-19. The €114.2m underspend was not surrendered but was retained by my Department and formed part of €160m transferred to the Energy Efficiency National Fund (EENF) in December 2021.

Details of the €160m transfer to the EENF, which included €100 million to support energy efficiency improvements for households and €60 million for the proposed low interest rate loan scheme in 2022, were set out at the Select Committee on the Environment and Climate Action at its consideration of a supplementary estimate for my Department on 1st December 2021.

A total of €267m, of which €202 million is from the investment of carbon tax receipts, is being allocated for residential and community retrofit schemes in 2022. As outlined in the recently published *National Retrofit Plan\**, this investment will support almost 27,000 home energy upgrades, including over 8,600 homes to a BER of B2 and 4,800 free energy upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty.

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/5052a-national-retrofit-plan/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5052a-national-retrofit-plan/)

## Environmental Schemes

115. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if institutional investors or vulture funds will be eligible for taxpayer fund grants under the new national retrofit scheme for houses they own; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9165/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 (or cost optimal equivalent), and to install 400,000 heat pumps to replace existing heating systems by 2030. The National Development Plan (NDP) has provided an unprecedented financial commitment to support achievement of the Government's retrofit targets. A total of €8 billion of Exchequer funding (including €5 billion in carbon tax revenues) will be available to support residential upgrades to 2030.

The Government recently approved a package of supports to make it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills. Included in these measures was the establishment of the new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, offering increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%). Private homeowners, non-corporate landlords and Approved Housing Bodies whose properties meet the eligibility criteria can avail of the scheme.

## Energy Prices

116. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will liaise with the appropriate authorities to ensure customers using pay-as-you-go electricity meters will receive a €200 top-up for their meters when the credit is added to their account; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9173/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Electricity Costs (Domestic Electricity Accounts) Emergency Measures Bill 2022 will establish a scheme to make a once-off Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Payment to each domestic electricity account this year, having regard to the exceptional rise in energy prices.

This Bill is currently before the Oireachtas, with a view to the scheme becoming operational by the end of Quarter 1. This scheme is in addition to the Government's ongoing measures to address energy poverty and protect vulnerable customers. It is also in addition to the measures introduced in the Budget.

The scheme will apply to all domestic electricity accounts and will include pre-pay customers.

The scheme will be overseen by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) and operated by ESB Networks (ESBN) as the Distribution System Operator. The mechanism by which pay as you go customers will receive the credit is the subject of ongoing operational preparations underway between the CRU, ESBN and suppliers. The CRU has indicated that it is expected that this would happen by way of the credit being applied towards the account of the pay as you go customer, who would then receive the credit when they go to vend for credit. My Department is engaging closely with the CRU on this matter, and will continue to do so. The Deputy may also wish to note that regular information updates, including frequently asked questions, are being made available on gov.ie at: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/4ae14-electricity-costs-emergency-benefit-scheme/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4ae14-electricity-costs-emergency-benefit-scheme/).

### **Energy Production**

117. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the Government will consider extending the operation of Moneypoint Power Station beyond its scheduled closure date of 2025 in view of Ireland's ongoing energy security challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9193/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Action Plan 2021, published in November states that we will continue to decarbonise the electricity sector by taking advantage of our significant renewable energy resources. The Plan also includes a target to complete the phase-out of coal and peat-fired electricity generation in Ireland. In doing this we must ensure a continued secure supply of energy, which is vital for the proper functioning of society and the economy.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (the CRU) has statutory responsibility to monitor and take measures necessary to ensure the security of electricity supply. It is assisted in this role by EirGrid, Ireland's electricity Transmission System Operator.

Operational decisions pertaining to the power station referred to by the Deputy are a matter for the ESB and I have no function in the matter.

### **National Broadband Plan**

118. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide a progress report on the roll-out of the national broadband plan; the number of properties connected; the number of properties surveyed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9194/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million

people living and working in the over 554,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with some 679 schools.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 11 February, over 300,000 premises have been surveyed or have survey underway, with over 157,000 premises constructed or under construction across all counties. NBI has also advised that over 34,000 premises are passed with high speed fibre broadband and nearly 7,000 are connected in 16 counties; Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Kildare, Laois, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, Wexford and Wicklow and over 54,500 premises are available to order and pre-order across 21 counties. To date the level of connections on the NBI network are in line with, or exceeding projections.

Further details are available on specific areas 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.

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 11 February 2022, 486 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. Further details can be found at [nbi.ie/bcp-locations/](http://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/).

My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area. Further details of schools in scope are available on the NBI website, at [nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/](http://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/).

## **Electricity Grid**

119. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when persons will be able to sell electricity back to the grid. [9246/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Clean Export Guarantee (CEG) tariff represents the first phase of a comprehensive enabling framework for micro-and small-scale generators in Ireland allowing them to receive remuneration from their electricity supplier for all excess renewable electricity exported to the grid at a competitive market rate. The Regulations that transpose Articles 21 and 22 of the recast Renewable Energy Directive were signed into Irish law on 15 February 2022 which give effect to the above-mentioned articles and allow for the commencement of export payments to micro-and small-scale generators by their suppliers.

Following a public consultation, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) published a decision on an interim enabling framework for the CEG on 1 December 2021 which outlines the interim arrangements, including eligibility criteria and the remuneration methodology. The CRU has decided upon a competitive market-based approach to the setting of this tariff, as well as a number of provisions to ensure that its implementation aligns with the National Smart Metering Programme. It is envisaged that initial payments or credits from suppliers will be available after June of this year and the CRU has requested that suppliers communicate their decision on when initial CEG payments will be made to customers at the earliest opportunity.

The supplier may offer back-payments in the form of a credit to an account, if this approach is considered to be the most appropriate. The CRU also expects back-payments to be communicated clearly to customers of each supplier. Furthermore, a tax disregard of €200 was introduced in Budget 2021 in respect of personal income received by households who sell residual renewable electricity, which they generate, back to the grid.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

120. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the position regarding broadband connections in an area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9319/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The premises referred to in the Question is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie).

BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard.

Complaints about service provision are a matter to be dealt with between the consumer and the service provider in the first instance. If this avenue has been exhausted without a satisfactory resolution, the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) may be able to assist further. ComReg is the independent body that issues licences to broadband service providers and investigates complaints to make sure that companies are delivering services in line with their licence obligations.

### **North-South Interconnector**

121. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he will publish the findings of his review into the north-south interconnector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9321/22]

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

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

Notwithstanding this, I decided to commission a further short review to assess if the overall

finding from the 2018 report remains valid. Formal procurement of international experts in electricity grid infrastructure was completed last September. Whilst my Department had hoped to receive their report before now, the experts have informed my officials that they plan to submit it to the Department by next month. I plan to publish it shortly after I have received and considered it.

### **Environmental Schemes**

122. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the eligibility criteria for the warmer homes retrofitting scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9322/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers free energy upgrades for eligible homeowners in low income households who are most at risk of energy poverty. It is administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). Since the start of the scheme in 2000, over 143,000 free upgrades have been supported by the scheme. In 2021, the average cost of the energy efficiency measures provided per household had increased to €17,100., reflecting the increased scope of works carried out. A budget allocation of €109 million has been provided for this scheme this year. This will support an increase in the number of free home upgrades, from an average of 177 per month in 2021 to 400 per month this year, helping to reduce waiting times and clear Covid impacted backlogs.

In changes recently agreed by Government, for the first time, applications can now be accepted from qualifying homeowners who previously received supports under the Scheme, but who could still benefit from even deeper measures. The Scheme eligibility criteria will also be extended to include those in receipt of the Disability Allowance for over 6 months and have a child under 7 years. The Scheme will also target the worst performing properties, by prioritising homes that were built and occupied before 1993 and have a pre-works BER of E, F or G. Existing applications will not be affected by this change.

The key eligibility criteria are outlined below:

1. Must own and live in your own home
2. Home must have been built and occupied before 2006
3. Must be receipt of one of the following welfare payments:
  - Fuel Allowance as part of the National Fuel Scheme;
  - Job Seekers Allowance for over six months and have a child under seven years of age;
  - Working Family Payment;
  - One-Parent Family Payment;
  - Domiciliary Care Allowance;
  - Carers Allowance and live with the person you are caring for, or
  - Disability Allowance for over six months and have a child under seven years of age

Further details with respect to the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme are available at [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie).

## Climate Action Plan

123. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of successful applicants to the Climate Action Fund in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9337/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** At least €500 million will be available from the Climate Action Fund over the period to 2027 to support projects, initiatives and research that contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate and energy targets and goals. In addition, the Government will make major investments through substantial other funding, set out in the National Development Plan.

To date, over €140 million has been committed from the Climate Action Fund for a range of projects, including in relation to district heating, EV infrastructure, creative climate action, co-financing for EU LIFE projects, and a Community Climate Action Programme. Through the Community Climate Action Programme, announced in November 2021, €60 million will be invested in community climate action projects and initiatives, as well as capacity building, over the next three years. Under this Programme, an open call was launched by Pobal in November 2021. A total of 72 applications were received in response to this call and are currently being assessed.

During 2021, 14 projects were approved for funding under Creative Climate Action, a collaboration supported by the Climate Action Fund and the Creative Ireland Programme. A further eight projects received approval-in-principal in 2021 to co-financing from the Climate Action Fund for EU LIFE projects. Final approval for this co-financing is conditional on these projects successfully securing EU LIFE funding.

As a next step, an open call will be developed for launch in 2022 aimed at providing funding for further projects aligned with the priorities of the Government's Climate Action Plan 2021. Work on the development of this call will commence shortly. Details on the scope of the call and eligibility criteria will be available on my Department's website in due course.

## National Parks

124. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the Environment Fund has supported the development of new parks and wildlife centres; the number and location of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9338/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Environment Fund has not been used to develop new parks and wildlife centres and there are no requests for such funding on hand.

## Renewable Energy Generation

125. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the feasibility study into the establishment of a green energy hub or renewable energy hub in the midlands using the existing infrastructure in this region. [9339/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Just Transition Commissioner recommended in his first progress report, published in May 2020, that a study be undertaken in relation to the future potential of the ESB power stations

at both Lanesborough (Lough Ree Power) and Shannonbridge (West Offaly Power) for the establishment of a dedicated Energy Hub in the Midlands. This was subsequently included as a commitment in the Programme for Government. The ESB has been participating in a number of working groups established under the Just Transition programme which looked at the future of the Midlands area following the closure of the ESB Midlands stations and the ending of the harvesting of peat by Bord na Móna.

One of these groups, which included the Just Transition Commissioner and Offaly and Longford County Councils, looked specifically at how the existing infrastructure on the ESB station sites might form a part of a future renewable energy hub. ESB announced the outcome of this process on 18 June 2021, confirming that:

- having considered commercial opportunities within the electricity market as well as national energy and climate action policies, no viable solution was found to repurpose the existing plants;

- the company will, therefore, demolish the existing plants in line with the planning obligations for the stations;

- the company is exploring how other buildings on the sites could be handed over for use by community groups;

- ESB is currently developing planning applications for both station sites as renewable energy centres, in anticipation of future competitive tenders to be held by EirGrid and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU). The proposed technology includes synchronous condensers and energy storage capabilities at both locations. Detailed environmental assessments will be carried out in support of those applications; and

- should these applications be successful, the ESB's plans would then enable the company to successfully develop these sites within the appropriate regulatory, environmental and planning timelines.

It should be noted that the management of ESB-owned facilities is an operational matter for the Board and management of the ESB.

## **Waste Management**

126. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the work his Department is undertaking in order to eliminate the use of materials which can neither be recycled or reused in keeping with the Circular Economy Strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9375/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The Circular Economy Bill 2022 aims to support Ireland's transition to a circular economy by providing the necessary legislative basis for several key measures including the Circular Economy Strategy; the Circular Economy Programme; the National Food Loss Prevention Roadmap; and the Circular Economy Fund.

As Minister of State for the Environment, Climate and Communications, I will have the power to introduce environmental levies on certain single-use items, including single-use cups, containers and packaging, and to prohibit their placing on the market where a suitable re-usable alternative is, or could be made, readily available. These measures will be introduced by means of secondary legislation. The Bill will also provide for the inclusion of targets related to reuse

and repair in Waste Management Plans, with the aim of saving resources, reducing emissions and preventing waste.

### Waste Management

127. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the support provided under the Circular Economy Innovation Grant Scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9376/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The purpose of the Circular Economy Innovation Grant Scheme (CEIGS) is to provide support to projects which work in the Circular Economy space, with the aim of advancing the Circular Economy in Ireland and raising awareness of the need to transition to a Circular Economy. The successful projects allocated funding under the 2021 funding round of the CEIGS are set out in the table below.

All funding awarded is governed by grant agreements between my Department and the relevant applicants. These grant agreements set out the deliverables for each project.

10 projects were initially selected for funding under the 2021 round, with a total funding commitment of some €490,000. Subsequently one project, 'Reuse Revolution for 3rd Level Institutions', was withdrawn by the applicant as the project was no longer proceeding. The relevant grant agreement was terminated by mutual consent, with the Department having incurred no expenditure in relation to the project.

#### PROJECTS

AM Acoustic Materials	Certifying AM Ecoboard
Cork Environmental Forum - Cork Urban Soil Project	The Cork Urban Soil Project
Community Reuse Network Ireland (CRNI)	ReMark Readiness
Everlend Ltd.	Reuse Revolution for 3rd Level Institutions*
Grow it Yourself - GIY Ireland	Wasted - food waste reduction in commercial food settings
Irish Green Building Council	Construction Materials Exchange (CMEx)
Novelplast Teoranta	Ocean Revive
PACE Organisation	The Composting Collective -
Thriftify Technologies Ltd	Thriftify
Marine Applications Ltd T/A Verifact	Net 360

### Illegal Dumping

128. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will detail the level of funding support that has been allocated to local authorities to combat dumping in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9377/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The Anti-Dumping Initiative (ADI) was introduced in 2017 to encourage a collaborative approach between local authorities, communities, and other State Agencies to tackling the problem of illegal dumping. Funding of over €12 million has been

provided by my Department under the Initiative, which has supported the delivery of over 1,250 projects nationwide. Details of funding, broken down by local authority and individual project, for each of the years 2017-2021 are available on the gov.ie website at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/e27ac-anti-dumping-initiative/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e27ac-anti-dumping-initiative/). Allocations for 2022 have yet to be finalised, but I anticipate that a further €3m will be made available to support the Initiative in 2022.

My Department also continues to invest significantly in the local authority waste enforcement network under the Local Authority Waste Enforcement Measures Grant Scheme, with the intention of maintaining a visible presence of waste enforcement personnel on the ground across the State. Over €7.7m was provided to local authorities under the scheme in 2021, while my Department also provides ongoing support (€1mn in 2021) to the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities, which were established to position the local authority sector to better respond to emerging and priority waste enforcement challenges.

### **Energy Prices**

129. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the level of engagement that has taken place with energy providers in respect of the cost of energy for households; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9378/22]

**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. The CRU, as the Deputy will appreciate, is an independent statutory regulator and is accountable for the performance of its functions, including more generally on the matter raised in this question, to the Oireachtas, and not to me as Minister. In this regard, I understand that the CRU appeared before Committee on Environment and Climate Action as recently as the 15th February to answer its questions on these and other matters. More broadly, and in view of the current pressures faced by households following the exceptional recent rise in international energy prices, I introduced The Electricity Costs (Domestic Electricity Accounts) Emergency Measures Bill 2022, that will provide for a credit payment, on a once off basis in 2022, to each domestic electricity account amounting to €200 (including VAT). This payment is part of a suite of policy measures announced by Government designed to give additional support households at this time, in addition to those already introduced. The payment is facilitated by the Distribution System Operator (ESB Networks) and electricity suppliers who are working with CRU on its operation.

### **National Broadband Plan**

130. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps his Department is taking to address delays to the roll-out of the national broadband plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9379/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed

and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 554,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with some 679 schools. The NBP roll out is currently a 7 year plan under the contract and deployment is due to be complete by the end of 2026.

Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, National Broadband Ireland has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan. I am advised by NBI that, as of 11 February 2022, over 300,000 premises have been surveyed or have survey underway, with over 157,000 premises constructed or under construction across all counties. NBI has also advised that premises are connected in 16 counties; Carlow, Cavan, Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Kildare, Laois, Limerick, Louth, Monaghan, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary, Wexford and Wicklow and over 54,500 premises are available to order and pre-order across 21 counties.

Further details are available on specific areas 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.

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

- Increasing the rate of pole replacement and duct remediation per month;
- Bringing in additional NBI resources;
- Earlier procurement of material used in the build stages; and
- Bringing in additional subcontractors

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

## **Environmental Schemes**

131. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of upgrades completed under the warmth and well-being scheme, by county, in each of the years 2016 to 31 December 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9380/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Warmth and Wellbeing pilot scheme aims to objectively measure and validate the health and wellbeing impacts of improving the living conditions of vulnerable people living in energy poverty with chronic respiratory conditions. The scheme is a collaboration between my Department and the Department of Health and is jointly administered by the Health Service Executive and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. Since 2016, over 1,400 homes have received free upgrades to their homes, including attic and wall insulation, window and door replacement and heating system upgrades, where needed.

One of the qualifying criteria for the scheme was that applicants must reside within the area designated for the pilot scheme, namely Dublin 8, 10, 12, 22 and 24. The number of upgrades completed in these areas under the Warmth and Wellbeing scheme in each of the years 2016 to 31 December 2021 are as follows.

YEAR	NO. OF HOMES COMPLETED
2016	72
2017	360
2018	455
2019	340
2020	91
2021	146
TOTAL	1,464

Following the successful pilot works a Report is being prepared by the London School of Hygiene and tropical Medicine, expected in Q2 this year. Given that the research element reached a sufficient number of applicants and based on the Steering Group feedback, the Scheme is now closed to new applicants with associated funding transferring to the broader Warmer Homes Scheme from 2023.

### Environmental Schemes

132. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details of the way the warmth and well-being scheme will be incorporated into new schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9381/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Warmth and Wellbeing pilot scheme aims to objectively measure and validate the health and wellbeing impacts of improving the living conditions of vulnerable people living in energy poverty with chronic respiratory conditions. The scheme is a collaboration between my Department and the Department of Health and is jointly administered by the Health Service Executive and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. Since 2016, almost 1,500 homes have received free upgrades to their homes, including attic and wall insulation, window and door replacement and heating system upgrades where needed. Given that the research element of the scheme has now closed to participants having reached a sufficient number, new applications for the scheme will cease on 28 February. Existing applications will receive their upgrades in line with the existing terms and conditions.

The Exchequer investment in this scheme has significantly improved the warmth and comfort of the homes involved. Initial reports have indicated that the upgrades are also delivering benefits to the health and wellbeing of participants, including reports of needing fewer GP and hospital visits, fewer prescriptions for antibiotics as well as increased engagement with other support services in the community. An independent analysis of the scheme benefits is being carried out by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, in collaboration with the Health Service Executive.

The details of how the scheme can inform Government's approaches to retrofitting, especially with regard to those who are more vulnerable and at risk of energy poverty, will be considered when the final findings of the analysis are available. From next year, the Warmth and Wellbeing budget will be transferred to the Warmer Homes Scheme.

### **Environmental Schemes**

133. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if consideration will be given by his Department to engaging with other stakeholders on building capacity to achieve the key measures of the national retrofitting scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9382/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The National Retrofit Plan sets out the Government's approach to achieving the Climate Action Plan targets of upgrading the equivalent of 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal level and installing 400,000 heat pumps to replace older, less efficient heating systems by 2030.

The Plan was informed by engagement, consultation and workshops with homeowners, the supply chain and financiers as well as collaborative working across relevant Government Departments and Agencies. The Government is committed to continuing to work in a collaborative way with stakeholders in relation to the implementation of the Plan. In addition, a cross-Departmental steering group will be established to oversee and monitor progress against our national targets, and develop new initiatives and policy responses as required.

### **Environmental Schemes**

134. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if consideration will be given to the grouping of homes together, for example neighbours, for the purposes of delivering significant energy upgrades under the national retrofitting scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9383/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government has approved a package of supports as part of the delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and reduced emissions.

These new measures include:

- The establishment of the new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, offering increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%).

- Establishment of a network of registered One Stop Shops to offer a new end-to-end project management service. This includes surveying the home; designing the upgrades; managing the grant processes; helping with access to finance; engaging the contractors to deliver the work and then quality-assuring that work.

It is expected that the One Stop Shops will be distributed across Ireland, with a considerable number capable of offering services nationwide, due to the network of contractors they are working with throughout the country. Other One Stop Shops are expected to work within geographic regions. This will ensure that every home can benefit from the One Stop Shop service on offer.

The capital funding available for the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme is €97 million, with a €40 million allocation in 2022 and €57 million in 2023. This is expected to deliver 2,000 deep energy retrofits to B2 level with a heat pump in 2022 and an additional 3,000 in 2023.

The new one stop shop model is suitable for bringing together groups of homes for aggregated projects thereby creating efficiencies in delivery and developing new innovation in processes and technologies.

Furthermore, the Community Energy Grant Scheme makes grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area. The Scheme is designed to support cross-sectoral, partnership approaches that deliver energy savings to a range of building types including public, commercial and community buildings, with a particular focus on using the projects to deliver home retrofits.

The total budget for the Community Energy Grant scheme will be €43 million in 2022, of which approximately €15 million will relate to home retrofits. The new grant rates announced under the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme will also be available under the Community Energy Grant scheme for homeowners wishing to undertake their energy upgrades as part of a community project

Registration for companies wishing to apply to be a one stop shop is now open. I expect the first One Stop Shops to be registered within the coming weeks. Homeowners can then make applications for upgrades. The call for projects under the Community Energy Grant scheme will be launched shortly.

## **Cybersecurity Policy**

135. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of staff working at the National Cybersecurity Centre in each of the years 2011 to 31 December 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9384/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The National Cyber Security Centre, which is located within my Department, was established in 2011 with a broad remit across the cyber security of Government ICT and critical national infrastructure. The NCSC has three main roles: national incident response; information sharing; and Building Resilience. The NCSC supports Government Departments and other public bodies to improve the resilience and security of their IT systems to better protect services that our people rely upon, and their data. In July 2021 on foot of an capacity review commissioned from an international consultancy, the Government agreed to implement a number of capacity building measures for the National Cyber Security Centre.

These measures include increasing the overall fulltime staffing complement of the NCSC to at least 70 over the next 5 years with 20 additional staff to be recruited by the end of 2022.

The current and annual levels of staffing are contained in the table below. It should be noted that prior to 2016 the National Cyber Security Centre had no full-time staff; all of the cyber security specialists were contractors.

Year	Number of Staff
2016	2
2017	12
2018	17
2019	22
2020	24
2021	29

### Departmental Consultations

136. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of submissions received as part of the public consultation process on carbon budgets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9385/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Carbon budgets are a key component of the new climate governance arrangements set out in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021. The Act, which was signed into law in July 2021, commits Ireland to reach a legally-binding target of a climate neutral economy no later than 2050 (the “National Climate Objective”), and to achieve a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2018 levels. The carbon budget programme (2021-2025; 2026-2030; and 2031-2035 [provisional]) will, once adopted, determine the level of greenhouse gases that may be emitted in Ireland in each given five-year carbon budget period and will be consistent with furthering the achievement of the national climate objective.

Under the Act, the Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) is tasked with preparing a proposed carbon budget programme based on the most up to date scientific evidence and analysis, and then presenting its proposal to the Minister. The CCAC submitted its first proposed programme of three consecutive carbon budgets to the Minister on 25 October 2021.

Before making recommendations to Government, the Minister launched a public consultation on the CCAC’s proposed carbon budget programme. The consultation opened on 22 December 2021 and closed on 8 February 2022.

In total 148 submissions have been received, comprising 117 from individuals and 31 from organisations.

### Environmental Schemes

137. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if there is a Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland grant for lighting available for schools to switch to more carbon-friendly LED lighting; if not, if such a grant is planned for the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9538/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Capital funding for Schools is generally a matter for my colleague the Minister for Education and Skills and my Department does not provide specific broad based grant support for the type of works indicated. However, my Department does fund a wide range of energy efficiency and renewable energy supports to public bodies, including schools, to educate and enable them to improve their energy efficiency and decarbonise their activities.

The Climate Action Plan sets the public sector ambitious 2030 targets of achieving 50% energy efficiency improvement (increased from 33% by 2020) and 51% emissions reduction. Relevant, initiatives to support the achievement of these targets include:

- The Public Sector Energy Efficiency Programme, an energy management and advisory programme, which provides comprehensive support and engagement, including training and the sharing of best practices, to guide public sector bodies and schools in delivering energy efficiency improvements; and,

- The Public Sector Schools Pathfinder Programme, co-funded with the Department of Education and Skills, which provides capital supports to improve energy efficiency and decarbonise school buildings. My Departments' contribution to the 2022 schools initiative is over €11 million, which will see 6 schools benefiting from a selection of energy efficiency works.

Further information is available on the SEAI website, [www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/](http://www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/)). Information for schools is also available: [/www.seai.ie/community-energy/schools/save-energy-at-school/](http://www.seai.ie/community-energy/schools/save-energy-at-school/)

### **Environmental Schemes**

138. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has considered the inclusion of standalone grants for windows and doors, which does not seem to be supported as part of a deep retrofit. [9549/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme offers increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%). The Scheme introduces a new way to undertake home energy upgrades with One-Stop-Shops providing an end-to-end service for homeowners. This includes surveying the home; designing the upgrades; managing the grant process; helping with access to finance; engaging contractors to deliver the work; and quality assuring the work.

Homes, built and occupied pre-2011, and owned by private homeowners, non-corporate landlords and Approved Housing Bodies are eligible for the scheme. This provides an unprecedented opportunity for people all over Ireland to upgrade to a warmer, healthier and more comfortable home, with lower energy bills.

Window and door replacements are available under the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, as well as under the Community Energy Grant scheme, as part of a whole house upgrade solution, as required, to achieve an energy efficient home to B2.

Window and door replacement are also available in some circumstances under the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme which delivers free upgrades to eligible homeowners in low income households vulnerable to energy poverty.

Window and door replacements are not supported under the Better Energy Homes Scheme,

where homeowners can choose to carry out works on a step by step, self-managed basis.

### **Environmental Schemes**

139. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the low-interest loans and the one-stop shop are intended to support all energy upgrades or only those deep retrofits designed to get to a B2 BER rating. [9550/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government has approved a package of supports as part of the delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and lower emissions.

Included in these measures is the establishment of the new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, offering increased and very generous grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%).

In addition, Government have been clear that it is important that households that want to undertake a deep retrofit but do not have the financial means to carry out the upgrade in a single project, should be supported at the enhanced grant levels. For that reason, many of the new higher grant rates are also now available under the Better Energy Homes Scheme allowing homeowners to take a step-by-step approach or self-manage the project. The One Stop Shops can support homeowners under either scheme.

Window and door replacements are available under the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, as well as under the Community Energy Grant scheme, as part of a whole house upgrade solution, as required, to achieve an energy efficient home to B2. Window and door replacement are also available in some circumstances under the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme which delivers free upgrades to eligible homeowners in low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. Window and door replacements are not supported under the Better Energy Homes Scheme, where homeowners can choose to carry out works on a step by step, and/or, self-managed basis.

The residential retrofit loan guarantee scheme is part of Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan and will be co-financed by the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility and Exchequer funding. The target for introduction of the scheme is Q3-2022. The loan guarantee will enable credit institutions to offer loans with reduced interest rates to private homeowners and non-corporate landlords and make comprehensive home energy efficiency upgrades even more affordable and accessible to more consumers.

The parameters for the loans under the guarantee have not been finalised yet. However, the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility funding sets a number of conditions the guarantee must comply with. One of those is that at least 75% of loans issued under the guarantee are used for medium-depth retrofit projects. Medium-depth level renovation is defined as upgrades achieving primary energy savings of between 30% and 60%, as per Commission Recommendation on Building Renovation (EU) 2019/786. Consequently, the low-cost retrofit loans under the guarantee will predominantly, though not exclusively, target comprehensive home energy upgrade projects.

### **Departmental Advertising**

140. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9573/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department was established on 27th June 2020 and there has been no payments since the establishment of the Department.

Prior to the establishment of my Department, a payment was made in 2017 by the Geological Survey Ireland of €1,968 for an advertisement in the construction industry special issue.

### **Environmental Schemes**

141. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if retrofitting grants will be available to persons with solid fuel central heating systems; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9623/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 (or cost optimal equivalent), and to install 400,000 heat pumps to replace existing heating systems by 2030. The review of the National Development Plan (NDP) resulted in an unprecedented financial commitment to support achievement of the Government's retrofit targets. A total of €8 billion of Exchequer funding (including €5 billion in carbon tax revenues) will be available to support residential upgrades to 2030.

The Government has recently approved a package of improvements including increased grants of up to 50% and other supports as part of the accelerated delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and lower emissions.

Persons with solid fuel central heating systems who wish to install heat pumps are eligible for retrofitting grants available from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland.

Grants for heat pumps are available under the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme as well as under the Community Energy Grant scheme as part of a whole house upgrade solution, because in these instances they tend to be required to achieve an energy efficient home to B2.

Grants for heat pumps are also available as individual measures under the Better Energy Homes Scheme.

### **Environmental Schemes**

142. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount of funding provided for the aggregated housing upgrade scheme; the amount spent to date; the progress to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9661/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government has recently approved a package of improved supports as part of the delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and

more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and emissions.

In this regard, the new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme will offer increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%).

The total capital funding cost for the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme is €97 million with a €40 million allocation in 2022 and €57 million in 2023. This is expected to deliver 2,000 deep energy retrofits, to B2 level with a heat pump, in 2022 and an additional 3,000 in 2023.

A key feature is the new one stop shop model, that is suitable to bringing together groups of homes for aggregated projects thereby creating efficiencies in delivery and fostering new innovation in processes and technologies.

The Community Energy Grant Scheme also continues to make grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area. The Scheme is designed to support cross-sectoral, partnership approaches that deliver energy savings to a range of building types including public, commercial and community buildings but with a particular focus on using the projects to deliver home retrofits.

The total budget for the Community Energy Grant scheme will be €43 million in 2022, of which approximately €15 million will relate to home retrofits. The new grant rates announced under the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme will also be available under the Community Energy Grant scheme for homeowners wishing to undertake their energy upgrades as part of a community project

Registration for companies wishing to apply to be a one stop shop is now open. I expect the first one stop shops to be registered within the coming weeks. Homeowners can then make applications for upgrades. The call for projects under the Community Energy Grant scheme will be launched shortly.

## **Departmental Funding**

143. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount of funding provided for the Just Transition Fund; the amount spent to date; the progress to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9662/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government remains committed to a just transition in the Midlands region and has dedicated significant funding to supporting workers, companies and communities affected by the closure of the peat-fired power stations and the end of peat extraction by Bord na Móna. To date, my Department has finalised grant agreements with 55 National Just Transition Fund projects. The total value of projects in delivery is approximately €30 million, with €20.5 million of this to be provided by the National Just Transition Fund. These projects have reported that they will create an estimated 154 direct jobs and 932 indirect jobs.

Up to 25% of the approved grant amount, in the form of prefunding, may be available to certain projects, particularly in the community and voluntary sector, that may require funding to initiate their projects. In general, however, payments of grant assistance from the Just Transition Fund are based on vouched expenditure by projects, in line with Government policy in relation to the management of, and accountability for, grants from Exchequer funds. To date, approximately €1.15 million has been paid to approved projects. My Department is working

with a small number of remaining applicants with a view to finalising grant agreements with these projects in the coming weeks. Further information on approved projects is available at:

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/ed10d-just-transition-fund](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ed10d-just-transition-fund)

### **Departmental Funding**

144. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount of funding provided for the peatlands rehabilitation scheme; the amount spent to date; if his Department has created the targeted number of jobs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9663/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Bord na Móna Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme (EDRRS) was approved by the Government in 2020 for the enhanced rehabilitation of 33,000 hectares of Bord na Móna peatlands previously harvested for peat extraction for electricity generation. Initially funding was from the Climate Action Fund up the value of €108 million, but subsequently, the full funding was secured from EU Recovery and Resilience Facility on completion of agreed milestones.

My Department has paid €7,636,517 to Bord na Móna to date in respect of works completed for this project. The funding of the EDRRS supports a just transition by maintaining jobs in the Midlands, as well as laying the foundation for more substantial and sustainable job creation into the future. All available permanent and seasonal employees who had been involved in peat production have been provided an opportunity for employment by Bord na Móna on rehabilitation and greenway activities, including EDRRS, or other Bord na Móna activities. The peak number employed on EDRRS to date is 225. As is normal with Bord na Móna, due to the seasonality of the work and the available workforce, this has reduced in recent weeks. However the number employed is in line with the expectation for the first year of the programme. Rehabilitation plans for 2022 are currently being finalised and employment will ramp up again in April and May to deliver the 2022 rehabilitation measures.

### **Environmental Schemes**

145. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the position regarding grant eligibility for energy efficiency and retrofitting works on private residential housing stock; if it will be a requirement to use contractors registered with the SEAI to secure this grant aid; the assistance that will be available for other verifiable works carried out that add to energy efficiency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9667/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government has approved a package of improved supports as part of the delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and emissions.

These new measures include:

- The establishment of the new demand-led National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, offering increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a

heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%).

- Establishment of a network of registered One Stop Shops to offer a new end-to-end project management service. This includes surveying the home; designing the upgrades; managing the grant processes; helping with access to finance; engaging the contractors to deliver the work and then quality-assuring that work.

It is expected that the One Stop Shops will be distributed across Ireland, with a considerable number capable of offering services nationwide, due to the network of contractors they are working with throughout the country. Other One Stop Shops will work within geographic regions. This will ensure that every home can benefit from the One Stop Shop service on offer.

The SEAI registration portal for companies to apply to be a One-Stop-Shop is now open. It is expected that the first One-Stop-Shops will be registered in the coming weeks. Homeowners can then make applications for upgrades.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) has a number of schemes in place to support homeowners to upgrade their properties including the fully funded Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme for those most at risk of energy poverty and two significant part-funded schemes, the Better Energy Homes Scheme and this recently announced National Home Energy Upgrade (Retrofit) Scheme. The increased grant levels have been standardised across all Schemes as appropriate.

Applicants to the Better Energy Homes Scheme must use SEAI Registered Contractors who are active on the registered Contractor List at the time of works. The Contractor List is available at [www.seai.ie/grants/home-energy-grants](http://www.seai.ie/grants/home-energy-grants) or on request from 01 808 2100. The Contractor must be registered for the particular measure that they are undertaking for the homeowner. The National Home Energy Upgrade (Retrofit) Scheme is managed by the SEAI registered one stop shops.

Further details with respect to each of the schemes are available at [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie).

## Waste Management

146. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the total value of uncollected plastic bag levy since 2002; when these levies will be collected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9717/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** Receipts from the plastic bag levy for each year are published in the Environment Fund Annual Accounts. Full details of the Environment Fund accounts are available at the following link: [Environment Fund Accounts](#). Final accounts for 2020 are not yet available.

Environmental enforcement inspections in relation to the plastic bag levy are undertaken by local authorities. In addition to the role of local authorities in carrying out environmental enforcement inspections, the Office of the Revenue Commissioners is responsible for compliance in relation to the collection of the levy. Such responsibilities include, *inter alia*, the identification of accountable persons; carrying out verification checks relating to the accuracy of the returns received; and pursuing accountable persons who fail to deliver returns and payments within the statutory time limits. Information in respect of tax collection, including the amount collected for the environment levy on plastic bags, is available on the Commissioner’s website at the following link: [Revenue Net Receipts by Taxhead](#).

## **Environmental Schemes**

147. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a person who was left a property from a family member can access the 50% and 80% retrofitting grant on their own home and the house that they were left in a will; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9740/22]

148. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a person who owns more than one house can access more than one 50% and 80% retrofitting grant under the new national retrofit scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9741/22]

149. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the 50% and 80% retrofitting grants under the new national retrofit scheme can be accessed by persons who will also apply for the new grant to renovate derelict properties being brought forward by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9742/22]

150. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the 50% and 80% retrofitting grants under the new national retrofit scheme can be accessed by a person who has a semi-built house; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9743/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 147 to 150, inclusive, together.

The Government has recently approved a package of improvements and supports as part of the delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and lower emissions.

The new measures include:

- The new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, offering increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%).

- The introduction of a special enhanced grant rate, equivalent to 80% of the typical cost, for attic and cavity wall insulation. The grant offering will be available across all part-funded schemes and will be available to all households in 2022, as a sustainable and enduring response to the current exceptionally high energy prices.

Homeowners may apply across more than one home, under the new measures, subject to the properties meeting the relevant eligibility criteria.

*Question No. 148 answered with Question No. 147.*

*Question No. 149 answered with Question No. 147.*

*Question No. 150 answered with Question No. 147.*

## **Broadband Infrastructure**

151. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Com-

munications if wireless broadband services are available at Ireland West Airport Knock using its metropolitan area network; the telecommunications operators using the metropolitan area network infrastructure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9800/22]

152. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if engagements have taken place within his Department in relation to the possibility of providing wireless broadband services at Ireland West Airport Knock using its metropolitan area network to local households in that area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9801/22]

153. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the newly established Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has plans to consider the efficient use of the infrastructure and assets based in the Knock metropolitan area network specifically and the possibility of connecting more customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9802/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 151 to 153, inclusive, together.

I am advised by enet, the company that manages the Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) on behalf of the State that three telecommunications operators are currently using the fibre based Metropolitan Area Network (MAN) infrastructure at Knock. While the services provided by these operators are a commercial matter between the operators and their end customers, I am advised that some of these operators are providing wireless/ broadband services in the general area.

The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce was re-established on 15 December 2021, which included attendance from key state stakeholders including ComReg and the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland. The meeting, which was co-chaired by myself and the Minister for Rural and Community Development, served as an orientation discussion, providing each of the stakeholders in attendance with an opportunity to propose actions under a number of priority areas to form the focus of the new Work Programme, including efficient use of infrastructure and assets; permit granting, planning and licensing issues; improving outdoor mobile phone coverage in both rural and urban areas; and consumer protection measures.

As part of considerations regarding how best to optimise the efficient use of infrastructure and assets into the future, the Taskforce will seek to build on work that is already underway at Local Authority level, focusing on measures aiming to remove remaining barriers affecting the openness and ease of access to infrastructure and assets, to further support the timely rollout of telecoms networks.

*Question No. 152 answered with Question No. 151.*

*Question No. 153 answered with Question No. 151.*

### **Public Services Provision**

154. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9831/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has produced some innova-

tive and ground breaking work over the last few years. Our teams have been nominated for, and won, several awards through the official Civil Service Awards, organised by Our Public Service in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. My Department does not subscribe to the Public Sector Magazine and, to the best of my officials' knowledge, has never received any award from the publication.

### Environmental Schemes

155. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown from 2022 to 2030 of the €3 billion funding for the national retrofit plan not funded by carbon tax receipts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9850/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 (or cost optimal equivalent), and to install 400,000 heat pumps to replace existing heating systems by 2030. The review of the National Development Plan (NDP) resulted in an unprecedented financial commitment to support achievement of the Government's retrofit targets. A total of €8 billion of Exchequer funding (including €5 billion in carbon tax revenues) will be available to support residential upgrades to 2030.

The planned annual allocations for Residential Retrofitting as outlined in the Climate Action Plan 2021 are set out in the table below with adjustments to the 2022 figure reflecting the recent Government decision on specific supports to aid the delivery of Ireland's National Retrofit Programme.

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Planned Allocation (€m)	267	291	380	469	641	898	1,257	1,760	2,000

In addition, the Department has been successful in its application for a further €111.7m for the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme to be included in the draft European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Co-funded programme 2021-2027. The draft programme is currently being reviewed by the Regional Assemblies.

This year, total funding allocation of €267 million has been allocated to the SEAI for residential and community retrofit schemes and the Solar PV scheme in 2022, of which, €202 million is carbon tax receipts.

The breakdown of funding allocations between exchequer funding and carbon tax receipts will be agreed annually as part of the Estimates process.

### Environmental Schemes

156. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the target number of homes to be completed under the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme in 2022 and 2023; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9851/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers free energy upgrades for eligible hom-

owners in low-income households at risk of energy poverty. It is administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). Since the start of the scheme in 2000, over 143,000 free upgrades have been supported by the scheme. In 2021, the average cost of the energy efficiency measures provided per household had increased to €17,100.

There are currently just over 7,000 homes awaiting works on the Warmer Homes Scheme work programme. This includes homes that are at various stages of the process: awaiting the initial survey of their home; have completed an initial home survey and are awaiting allocation to a contractor; have been allocated to a contractor for works; or, are currently undergoing works. It is important to note that activity under the Scheme in 2020 and 2021 was significantly impacted by COVID-related restrictions on the construction sector, given the nature of retrofit works, and this led to a large increase in the number of homes awaiting works.

The 2022 budget, at €109 million, is the highest ever and is nearly three times the 2021 out-turn (€38 million). This will support an increase in the number of homes retrofitted under the scheme from 177 per month in 2021 to 400 per month (or a total of 4,800) this year. The level of activity to be undertaken in 2023 will be determined, taking account of progress this year and as part of the 2023 Estimates process.

### **Environmental Schemes**

157. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the target number of homes to be completed under the attic and cavity wall insulation scheme in 2022 and 2023; the budget for this scheme in both years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9852/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government has approved a package of supports as part of the deliver of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills.

Included in these measures is the introduction of a special enhanced grant rate, equivalent to 80% of the typical cost, for attic and cavity wall insulation. The grant offering will be available across all part-funded schemes and will be available to all households in 2022, as a sustainable and enduring response to the current exceptionally high energy prices.

Funding for the initiative will be met from within the overall funding allocation of €267 million for the SEAI for residential and community retrofit schemes 2022. Decisions on the level of funding for the initiative in future years will be considered as part of the annual Estimates process.

The exceptionally high grants should secure strong interest among homeowners to avail of these energy upgrade measures this year, however the Scheme is obviously demand led and precise uptake is difficult to predict. SEAI estimates indicate that total numbers availing of the enhanced grant could double from a combined 4,500 to 9,000 or above.

### **Environmental Schemes**

158. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the carbon emission savings from deep retrofitting 1,000 homes under the national

home energy upgrade scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9853/22]

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

The Government has approved a package of improved supports as part of the delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and emissions.

Included in these measures is the establishment of the new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, offering increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%).

Capital funding of €40 million has been allocated to the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme this year which is expected to deliver 2,000 deep energy retrofits to B2 level with a heat pump.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) estimates that this level of output could achieve annual savings of 6.3 kilotonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. However, it is important to note that savings will depend on the characteristics of the homes availing of the grant measures, in particular size, as well as other factors such as existing levels of insulation and heating fuel type.

### **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

159. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address the proposed extension of the EU emissions trading system to energy and household energy production and its impacts on customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9857/22]

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

As part of its 'Fit for 55' package, the European Commission has presented a legislative proposal to review the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS). The aim of the review is to align the EU ETS Directive with the target set out in the European Climate Law to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 (compared to 1990 levels). The proposal makes provision for an extension of the existing ETS 'cap and trade' system to a new separate emissions trading system that would apply at the point at which fuels for the buildings and road transport sectors are placed on the market.

The proposal to extend the emissions trading system is of significant importance to Ireland, as the greenhouse gas emissions associated with fuel used in these sectors are currently subject to the domestic carbon tax. Changes to our existing carbon tax would affect the expected revenues from scheduled annual increases to 2030, as provided for in the Finance Acts. The Government intends to ring-fence these revenues for a range of climate action programmes including residential retrofit, targeted increases in social welfare payments and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty, and funding to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way.

Ireland is now in the process of engaging, through negotiations in the Environment Council of Ministers, on all aspects of the 'Fit for 55' package of proposals, to ensure that the ambitions of the package can be delivered collectively by the EU in the most cost-effective manner possible, balancing considerations of fairness and solidarity between and within Member States.

### **Waste Management**

160. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Department has plans to ensure access to domestic compost bins to persons in rural areas who are unable to get them through their provider; if not, if there is a plan to compensate persons who incur the additional cost of having to dispose their compostable waste in general waste bins; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9867/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, published in September 2020, commits to a number of specific measures to support the expansion of the brown bin service to all households in the State, including:

- Continuing to commit resources nationally to the prevention of food waste and to the regulation of optimal food waste collection and treatment practices;

- Making the provision of an organic waste bin mandatory as part of a waste collection service for all households;

- Through changes to waste collection permits, and working with the Local Authority sector, ensuring that every householder and business has access to a reliable, clean and sustainable way of managing food waste;

- Working to improve waste segregation in the commercial sector, including an awareness campaign and enforcement actions requiring segregated bins and incentivised charging to ensure waste minimisation and proper segregation;

- Using National Waste Collection Permit Office and other ‘brown bin’ data to develop strategies and investigate how new technology can support greater usage.

My officials have commenced the process of engaging with the key stakeholders, including the waste collection industry, with a view to delivering on these commitments in as short a time frame as possible. Part of the work will ensure that delivery of the national rollout of organic bins is consistent with other measures in the Plan.

### **Departmental Funding**

161. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 216 of 15 February 2022, the way that the additional funding in the recently announced plans will be spent given that these figures reference a €1 billion a year spend while the figures in the reply reference projected spending of less than half that; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9870/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 (or cost optimal equivalent), and to install 400,000 heat pumps to replace existing heating systems by 2030. The review of the National Development Plan (NDP) resulted in an unprecedented financial commitment to support achievement of the Government’s retrofit targets. A total of €8 billion of Exchequer funding (including €5 billion in carbon tax revenues) will be available to support residential upgrades to 2030. The planned annual allocations for Residential Retrofitting as outlined in the Climate Action Plan 2021 are set out in the table below with adjustments to the 2022 figure reflecting the recent Government decision on specific supports to aid the delivery of Ireland’s National Retrofit Programme.

In terms of profile, the projections are for a significant ramp up in output and outturn over the decade. This will require a major increase in the sector with significant employment opportunities nationwide. The recently announced increases in grants, together with the multi-annual funding certainty are key enablers for this.

Year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Planned Allocation (€m)	267	291	380	469	641	898	1,257	1,760	2,000

### Waste Management

162. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the work of his Department towards ensuring that every householder has access to a reliable, clean and sustainable way of managing their food waste; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9890/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, published in September 2020, which is being delivered on a phased basis over the 5 year lifetime of the Plan, includes measures to improve household food waste management.

Measures include:

- Making the provision of an organic waste bin mandatory as part of a waste collection service for all households;
- Through changes to waste collection permits, and working with the Local Authority sector, ensuring that every householder has access to a reliable, clean and sustainable way of managing food waste;
- Working with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make regulatory changes in planning and tenancy laws required to ensure apartment dwellers are provided with infrastructure to support food waste segregation;
- Using National Waste Collection Permit Office and other ‘brown bin’ data to develop strategies and investigate how new technology can support greater usage.
- Delivering sustained and visible public behavioural change campaigns to encourage waste prevention and recycling.

My officials have been engaging with key stakeholders with a view to delivering on a number of food waste commitments in as short a time frame as possible. Actions that are being progressed include, for example, food waste separation awareness campaigns that involve the roll out of a number of household food waste kitchen food waste caddy packs to make it easier to manage food waste at home. Approximately 300,000 kitchen food waste caddy packs will be funded by my Department over the next 2 years to support household food waste separation awareness initiatives.

### Departmental Communications

163. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Commu-

nications if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9958/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I have the application referred to in the Deputy's question on my official phone but I do not have the disappearing messages setting activated on it.

### Energy Prices

164. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the €200 electricity subsidy which was given to homeowners will be given to small business owners who both work and live in the same premises; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9982/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Electricity Costs (Domestic Electricity Accounts) Emergency Measures Bill 2022, currently before the Houses of the Oireachtas will establish a scheme to make a once off payment, in 2022, of to each domestic electricity account holder, to mitigate the exceptional rise in energy prices. The scheme will be operated by the Distribution System Operator (ESB Networks), and electricity suppliers and overseen by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU). Based on the number of domestic electricity accounts, ESBN will make payments to the individual energy suppliers who will then credit each domestic electricity account held with them. The scheme will also include pre-pay customers. This is an exceptional measure designed to be delivered directly to all domestic electricity accounts, as defined by the rate of distribution use of system charges to which they are subject, using the existing electricity billing infrastructure and without application or further qualifying criteria. The Deputy may also wish to note that regular information updates, including frequently asked questions, are being made available on gov.ie at: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/4ae14-electricity-costs-emergency-benefit-scheme/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4ae14-electricity-costs-emergency-benefit-scheme/).

### Environmental Schemes

165. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the final amount spent under the warmer homes scheme in 2021; the number of homes upgraded under the scheme; the current number with work in progress; the number in which work is expected to start in 2022; the amount provided for the scheme in 2021 and 2022, respectively; the projected total spend for 2022; the current delay for new applicants; the number of applicants who are currently waiting for work to commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9998/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers free energy upgrades for eligible homeowners at risk of energy poverty. Since 2000, over 143,000 free upgrades have been supported by the SEAI administered scheme. Last year, 2,126 upgrades were delivered under the scheme and the average cost of the energy efficiency measures provided per household was €17,100.

There are currently just over 7,000 homes awaiting works on the Warmer Homes Scheme work programme. It is important to note that activity under the Scheme in 2020 and 2021 was significantly impacted by COVID-related restrictions on the construction sector which led to a large increase in the number of homes awaiting works. Addressing wait times is a key priority for my Department and the SEAI.

The 2022 budget for the Scheme, at €109 million, will support an increase in the number of homes retrofitted from 177 per month in 2021 to 400 per month (or a total of 4,800) this year. This greatly increased level of activity will enable the homes currently on the waiting list to be cleared in approximately 18 months.

In addition to the record capital allocation for the Scheme this year, I have also secured additional staffing resources for the SEAI including the Warmer Homes Scheme team. Delivery capacity in the supply chain has also increased due to a new, broader contractor panel established in late 2020. The SEAI continues to work with the scheme contractors on an ongoing basis to further increase output.

The additional data requested by the Deputy is included in the table below.

Table 1: Warmer Homes Scheme data

CAPITAL ALLO-CATION 2021 €m	OUTTURN 2021 €m	ACTUAL OUTPUT 2021 (Homes)	CAPITAL ALLO-CATION 2022 €m	PROJECTED TO-TAL SPEND 2022 €m
100.0	38.1	2,126	109.0	109.0

### Environmental Schemes

166. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of homes upgraded under the warmer homes scheme in 2021, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9999/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers free energy upgrades for eligible homeowners in low-income households who are most at risk of energy poverty. It is administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). Since the start of the scheme in 2000, over 143,000 free upgrades have been supported by the scheme. In 2021, the average cost of the energy efficiency measures provided per household had increased significantly to €17,100. A budget allocation of €109 million has been provided for this scheme this year. This will support an increase in the number of free home upgrades, from an average of 177 per month in 2021 to 400 per month this year, helping to reduce waiting times and Covid impacted backlogs.

The number of homes upgraded under the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme in 2021, by county is set out in the table below.

County	2021
Carlow	25
Cavan	35
Clare	40
Cork	153
Donegal	116
Dublin	693
Galway	80
Kerry	52
Kildare	90
Kilkenny	37

County	2021
Laois	21
Leitrim	23
Limerick	49
Longford	21
Louth	61
Mayo	64
Meath	81
Monaghan	24
Offaly	30
Roscommon	43
Sligo	35
Tipperary	50
Waterford	85
Westmeath	52
Wexford	110
Wicklow	55
Total	2,125

### Environmental Schemes

167. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the final amount spent in each retrofitting scheme under his Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland in 2021; the amount provided for; the total spend in 2021; the number of homes that were made more energy efficient in each case where applicable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10000/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department funds a number of SEAI grant schemes to support homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their properties. Partial grants are available as well as free energy efficiency retrofits for people at risk of energy poverty. Since 2000, over 465,000 homeowners have upgraded their homes with support from the schemes, representing nearly one home in four across the country. This has resulted in warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes that are easier and cheaper to heat and light.

Detailed information in relation to home retrofit schemes for 2021 is set out in the table below. Of course activity was significantly impacted by restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

SCHEME	CAPITAL ALLOCATION €m	OUTTURNS €m	ACTUAL OUTPUT (Homes)
Better Energy Warmer Homes	100.0	38.1	2,126
Warmth and Wellbeing	9.0	3.3	146
Better Energy Homes	34.1	14.9	7,928
Solar PV	11.0	9.8	4,089

SCHEME	CAPITAL ALLO- CATION €m	OUTTURNS €m	ACTUAL OUTPUT (Homes)
Better Energy Communi- ties (Community Energy Grants/Sustainable En- ergy Communities)	40.0	21.8	353
Deep Retrofit	3.4	1.2	10
National Homes Retrofit	21.5	9.7	805

*Question No. 168 answered with Question No. 114.*

### Environmental Schemes

169. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the projected number of homes to be retrofitted in 2022 under the national retrofitting scheme, by month and scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10002/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government has approved a package of improved supports as part of the delivery of Ireland's residential retrofit programme. These measures are aimed at making it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills and emissions.

Included in these measures is the establishment of the new National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, offering increased grant levels of up to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump (up from the current level of 30-35%).

The total capital funding cost for the National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme is €97 million with a €40 million allocation in 2022 and €57 million in 2023. This is expected to deliver 2,000 deep energy retrofits to B2 level with a heat pump in 2022 and an additional 3,000 in 2023.

The SEAI registration portal for companies to apply to be a One-Stop-Shop is now open. It is expected that the first One-Stop-Shops will be registered in the coming weeks. Homeowners can then make applications for upgrades.

### Inland Fisheries

170. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has spoken with the CEO of Inland Fisheries Ireland to date in 2022. [10077/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I have not spoken with the CEO of Inland Fisheries Ireland in 2022 but senior officials in my Department engage regularly with the CEO through regular meetings, by phone and e-mail correspondence. I am regularly briefed and updated on significant issues which arise.

### Post Office Network

171. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Commu-

nications his views on introducing a public service obligation of approximately €17 million per annum for the post office network. [10115/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** There are no plans to bring forward a public service obligation at this time.

An Post is a commercial semi-state company and it is longstanding Government policy that postal services will not be directly subsidised by the taxpayer. The Government remains fully committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. A long-term low interest loan of €30m was provided to the company in December 2017, of which €15m was to support and protect the renewal of the post office network.

## Waste Management

172. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps that he is taking to ensure that all commercial waste companies offer customers compost bins; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10116/22]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, published in September 2020, commits to a number of specific measures to support the expansion of the brown bin service to all households in the State, including:

- Continuing to commit resources nationally to the prevention of food waste and to the regulation of optimal food waste collection and treatment practices;
- Making the provision of an organic waste bin mandatory as part of a waste collection service for all households;
- Through changes to waste collection permits, and working with the Local Authority sector, ensuring that every householder and business has access to a reliable, clean and sustainable way of managing food waste;
- Working to improve waste segregation in the commercial sector, including an awareness campaign and enforcement actions requiring segregated bins and incentivised charging to ensure waste minimisation and proper segregation;
- Using National Waste Collection Permit Office and other ‘brown bin’ data to develop strategies and investigate how new technology can support greater usage.

My officials have commenced the process of engaging with the key stakeholders, including the waste collection industry, with a view to delivering on these commitments in as short a time frame as possible. Part of the work will ensure that delivery of the national rollout of organic bins is consistent with other measures in the Plan.

## National Broadband Plan

173. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of a broadband connection for a household (details supplied) in an amber zone under the national broadband plan roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[10117/22]

*Awaiting reply from Department.*

### Penalty Points System

174. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the total number penalty points issued to uninsured motorists in each of the years 2017 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9640/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The number of penalty points issued to uninsured motorists in each of the years 2017 to 2021 is provided in the table below.

Offence	Year	Number of Penalty Point Endorsement Notices issued	Number of Penalty Points Applied
No Insurance (user)	2017	4,082	20,410
No Insurance (user)	2018	4,498	22,490
No Insurance (user)	2019	4,334	21,670
No Insurance (user)	2020	2,420	12,100
No Insurance (user)	2021	3,311	16,555

### Penalty Points System

175. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the number of penalty points issued as a result of having been identified by An Garda Síochána using the automatic number-plate recognition system to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9642/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The details requested by the Deputy cannot be extracted from the National Vehicle and Driver File (NVDF) database, as the method used in detecting penalty point offences is not supplied by An Garda Síochána or The Courts Service.

### Taxi Licences

176. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a hackney licence was turned down in the Castlegregory and Camp area of County Kerry (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9041/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including SPSV licensing, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

Accordingly, I have referred your question to the NTA for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

### Bus Services

177. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Transport if he will advise on matters raised in correspondence in relation to the provision of a bus service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9072/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport; however, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally, for decisions in relation to the routes of these services in conjunction with the relevant transport operators.

In light of the Authority's responsibility in this area, I have forwarded the Deputy's specific questions in relation to an update on Route W5 and the possible provision of additional bus services in Waterford to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Driver Test**

178. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address a matter in relation to approved driving instructors (details supplied); if he plans to address the cost of such tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9089/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under provisions set out in S.I. No. 203/2009 - Road Traffic (Driving Instructor Licensing) (No. 2) Regulations 2009 the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is legally required to carry out a check test of an Approved Driving Instructor every two years at the very minimum. This test takes the form of an observation by an RSA examiner of a lesson given by the instructor to a learner driver and is considered an essential element in the regulation and continuous professional development of driving instructors.

Driving is a complex and multi-faceted skill and instructors shoulder a considerable responsibility in teaching their students to behave safely and responsibly on the roads at all times. It is for this reason that it is imperative that the RSA have a means of ensuring that all instructors maintain the highest of teaching standards in the years after they have completed their initial qualification. It is important that we do not allow the current pandemic to unnecessarily undermine the very significant progress we have made in reducing the impact of road collisions on public health and health services.

### **Antisocial Behaviour**

179. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport the number of antisocial incidents recorded on the DART network since January 2020; the action his Department is taking to reduce this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9098/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The safety and security of both public transport passengers and staff, including arrangements to deal with anti-social behaviour, are important matters that, first and foremost, must be managed by every public transport company, in conjunction with An Garda Síochána, where appropriate. The National Transport Authority (NTA) is also engaged with public transport operators regarding the issue of anti-social behaviour.

The Department has been engaging regularly with the NTA and the three CIÉ companies, including Iarnród Éireann on the issue of anti-social behaviour and a number of actions have been taken. These include:

- Iarnród Éireann have significantly increased their security resources with up to 20 security teams operating daily on-board and in stations (spend on security has increased from €3.7 million to €5.2 million pa since 2016).

- Since May 2021, Iarnród Éireann and an Garda Síochána have joined forces to tackle anti-social behaviour in the Greater Dublin Area and on the DART, Northern Line and Heuston to Portlaoise services.

- Iarnród Éireann liaises on a minimum quarterly basis with An Garda Síochána in major districts to address trends and issues on an area basis.

- An Irish Rail/AGS inter-agency operation was established targeting incidents of graffiti and criminal damage to train carriages; as part of this operation Gardaí conducted patrols of rail lines in an effort to target groups involved in this activity.

- CCTV is available on most trains and has successfully been used on numerous occasions in securing prosecutions. They are also in place in stations.

- A DART text alert line has been established for discrete reporting of Anti-Social incidents.

The question raised concerning the number of antisocial incidents recorded on the DART network since January 2020 is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply on this matter.

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

### **Driver Test**

180. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address the matters raised in correspondence (details supplied); the current estimated waiting times for motorcycle driving test applications at each test centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9161/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is responsible for the operation of these tests. The information on waiting times is held by the RSA. I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's query to the RSA for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

While I cannot comment on the precise circumstances of individual cases, I understand there is no excessive delay on motorcycles tests in comparison to car driving tests. While there have been some centres where it has taken longer to get a motorcycle test than a car test, driver testers have been recently upskilled to test this category, and lists are therefore reducing across the board.

### **Public Transport**

181. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport the arrangements that will be

put in place for public transport users who have tax saver tickets following the recent reduction in fares; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9171/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport; I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport, nor decisions on fares. It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) that has responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services, provided under public service obligation (PSO) contracts

In light of the Authority's responsibility in this area, I have forwarded the Deputy's specific question in relation to the treatment of Tax saver tickets following the recently announced 20% average fare reduction on PSO services until the end of 2022, to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### Departmental Schemes

182. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider a package of measures to support taxi drivers, particularly owner-operators, given the impact of inflation on them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9172/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy may be aware, the majority of supports for SPSV operators that were put in place in response to the impacts of the Covid pandemic continue to be available. These supports comprise specific measures designed to support the sector, with a view to addressing statutory costs faced by operators which cannot be deferred. Standard licence renewal fees for SPSVs were waived in 2021 and are being waived again in 2022 at an estimated cost of €3 million. The NTA has put in place schemes to refund the motor tax paid by SPSV operators in the period 1 September 2021 to 31 August 2022, and to waive NCT fees for the same period. Further details on these schemes are available on the NTA website. The NTA has also waived standard age limits for taxis and hackneys through to the end of 2022, thereby ensuring no operator exits the industry simply because of the need to replace a vehicle.

Recognising that the replacement of a vehicle is the single largest cost faced by any SPSV operator, and in view of my commitment to support the transition of the SPSV fleet towards zero/low-emission vehicles, I announced on February 4th last, the re-opening of the eSPSV Grant Scheme, with a further €15 million allocated to it for 2022. The take-up rate for this Scheme was exceptionally high in 2021: almost 600 drivers successfully applied for grants, with over €11 million paid out as well as €4 million in provisional grant offers.

In addition, the Deputy should be aware that the NTA has now started work on a new National Maximum Fare Review and is engaging with its service providers in the matter. This Review, which is undertaken on a regular basis by the NTA, assesses any changes in the market facing the taxi industry as well as changes in annual taxi operating costs. These costs include the fixed and running costs of an average taxi and labour costs. The objective of the Review is to determine whether changes need to be made to the current level of maximum fares and the NTA has confirmed that it is endeavouring to conclude the review process as quickly as possible in 2022 whilst still ensuring that all steps, including a consultation process, are appropriately completed.

More generally, in relation to recent price increases and their impact on consumers, Government announced a suite of policy measures designed to support all households on February 10th. These measures take account of the increase in consumer prices in recent months,

especially the increase in fuel and other energy prices and come on top of the measures already taken in Budget 2022 to support households – such as increases in social welfare rates as well as increases in tax bands, and also the electricity credit for households which the Government agreed on last year in recognition of the impact of rising energy costs.

### **Rail Network**

183. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport the details of the investment that is planned by Iarnród Éireann for its network in County Clare during 2022; the consideration that is being given to the opening of a rail stop at Crusheen, County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9186/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy may be aware, the Infrastructure Manager Multi Annual Contract (IMMAC) provides the funding framework for the protection and renewal of our railway infrastructure, including the rail line between Limerick and Athenry, which runs through County Clare.

This is the third year of the five year IMMAC programme, and in December, Government approved an additional €94.55m for the programme which means that over the five years of the programme, a total of just over €1.1 billion in Exchequer funding will be made available to support delivery. This funding will increase service reliability and punctuality, improve journey times and ensure continued safety of rail services across the network.

As Minister of Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport. The opening of stations on the network, including the former station referred to at Crusheen, Co Clare, is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance.

In view of the Infrastructure Manager's responsibility in this matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to Iarnród Éireann for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Airport Security**

184. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport when a centralised system for processing enhanced security checks for air travel workers was introduced in Ireland; the decision-making process behind using a centralised system for the process; the reason that Shannon Airport is no longer directly processing such security checks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9187/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Arrangements were put in place to implement new enhanced background check requirements for a significant number of aviation employees from 1 January 2022. This was in line with updated European regulatory requirements aimed at guarding against the threat posed to civil aviation by terrorist activity.

These arrangements included the designation of daa as the centralised gateway through which applications for background check data are routed. An Garda Síochána requested a single point of origin for applications and a single first point of receipt of results. Daa was the only organisation with the personnel and infrastructure to deliver this service from 1 January.

Daa is undertaking this role on an interim basis and my Department is exploring options for the permanent location of this service.

### **Driver Test**

185. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons waiting for a motorcycle driving test, by county, in each of the past two years to date, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9317/22]

186. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport the number of instructors available for motorcycle testing, by county, over the past two years to date, in tabular form; his plans to reduce the current backlog in waiting times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9318/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 185 and 186 together.

Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority has statutory responsibility for the operation of these tests. I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's query to the RSA for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

*Question No. 186 answered with Question No. 185.*

### **Tax Collection**

187. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport when national motor tax offices will reopen for in-person customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9335/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Motor tax is payable online or at 46 local motor tax offices in 26 local authority areas. While I have policy responsibility for motor tax, local motor tax offices are operated by the local authority system and service provision is a matter for local management.

### **Road Traffic Offences**

188. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the use of section 38 of the Road Traffic Act 1961; the regularity with which this mechanism is used; if his attention has been drawn to any increased use in recent months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9432/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Section 38 of the Road Traffic Act 1961, as amended, refers to the prohibition on driving without a driving licence. A person shall not drive a vehicle in a public place unless they hold a valid driving licence for the vehicle.

The enforcement of road traffic legislation is a matter for An Garda Síochána. My Department does not hold information on road traffic offences. I recommend that the Deputy contact the Minister for Justice for details on the frequency of charges brought under section 38 and whether there has been any increased use in recent months.

### **Departmental Advertising**

189. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport the amount that his Depart-

ment has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9585/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Deputy, I can confirm that my department has made no payment for advertising, features and or other matters, in the Public Sector Magazine.

### **Road Projects**

190. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport the anticipated timeline for the completion and opening of the various stages of the N22 Baile Bhuirne to Macroom road; if he will report on the progress of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9629/22]

**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. 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 Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code and the necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on the status of the N22 Baile Bhuirne to Macroom project.

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

### **Rail Network**

191. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if consideration has been given to options to reduce journey times between railway stations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9630/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister of Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport. The operation, maintenance and renewal of the rail network and stations on the network including the station referred to at Killarney, Co Kerry, is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance.

In view of Iarnród Éireann's responsibility in this matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Rail Network**

192. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if a tourism project (details supplied) will be considered on part of the rail network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9631/22]

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

The issue raised by the Deputy in relation to the possible scheduling of a steam locomotive

or vintage train between Killarney and Tralee in the summer months is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

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

### **Cycling Facilities**

193. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department will consider the viability of the use of spare space along existing in-use railway corridors as potential cycle routes; if so, if sections of line throughout the network have been identified as suitable in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9635/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Government's Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways was published in 2018, though the use of existing in-use Railway Corridors was not considered at that time. The Department, through TII, are funding over 40 Greenway projects around the country, some on disused or closed railway lines. TII are also developing a National Cycle Network Strategy that will identify routes to be developed over the coming years.

The issue with utilising in-use railway corridors is whether it is safe to do so and the views of the Commission for Railway Regulation would need to be sought in the first instance. There is also the issue of width, is there enough space within Iarnród Éireann's ownership, or would additional land purchase be required. There would need to be adequate fencing installed to separate people walking and cycling from the railway line, and bridges and tunnels pose challenges especially along in-use railway corridors. However, the balance of considerations can favour running a greenway beside a railway in the right circumstances and planning approval and Government funding has been granted for the Broadmeadow Greenway along the railway causeway across Broadmeadow Estuary which is expected to go to construction next year.

We will bring the issue to the attention of TII as they work on their National Cycle Network Strategy.

### **Rail Network**

194. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department will provide details, by list, map or by any other means, of railway corridors that are no longer in use but still in State ownership; if any sections of old line along these corridors have been sold; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9636/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport; however, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport. The issue raised by the Deputy in relation to details of State-owned railway corridors that are no longer in use is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Road Traffic Offences**

195. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the An Garda Síochána automatic number plate recognition and the motor third party liability project which will enhance the ability of An Garda Síochána to identify and apprehend uninsured drivers; when the Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021 which relates to this project will be enacted; the length of time after the enactment of the legislation it will take for the measures relating to the project to take effect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9637/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** My Department has been pursuing, with the insurance industry, the development of a database which will enable An Garda Síochána to better identify uninsured driving. Phase 1 of this project, covering approximately 92% of policies, is substantially complete, with work underway on Phases 2 and 3. This is a major IT project, with substantial costs across insurance companies, and it will take a number of years to fully implement. Essential legislation to enable completion of the project will be introduced as part of the forthcoming Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021.

The Bill completed second stage in Dáil Éireann on 18 November. It is already a wide-ranging Bill and a number of amendments will be brought forward at Committee Stage. These will deal with a range of measures, including driver licence revocation and introduction of active travel infrastructure on a trial basis, as well some of the matters already addressed in the Bill.

The Oireachtas Committee on Transport will determine when it will hold Committee Stage for the Bill and subsequent stages will depend on scheduling in the Dáil and Seanad.

As with most legislation, once the Bill is passed there will be a phased commencement. I will engage with stakeholders to ensure that the measures related to the MTPL database will be brought into effect as quickly as possible.

### **International Agreements**

196. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Transport when the State will ratify the 2012 Cape Town Agreement for Fishing Vessel Safety. [9649/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The 2012 Cape Town Agreement is an International Maritime Organisation (IMO) agreement covering safety requirements for fishing vessels of 24 metres in length and over.

The first attempt to regulate this larger fishing vessel sector at the IMO led to the adoption in 1977 of the Torremolinos International Convention for the Safety of Fishing Vessels. During the 1980s it became clear that an insufficient number of countries were ever going to ratify the Convention. This led to the adoption in 1993 of the Torremolinos Protocol of 1993 Relating to the Torremolinos International Convention for the Safety of Fishing Vessels, 1977 (SFV PROT 1993). Again, the rate of ratifications was insufficient to allow the Protocol to enter into force.

The EU considered that the safety of large fishing vessels was a matter that they should legislate on. Thus, Directive 97/70/EC was adopted (later amended by Directive 2002/35/EC). The Directives were based on the provisions of the Protocol and were transposed into Irish legislation via S.I. 417 of 2002 and S.I. 418 of 2002 which remain the relevant Irish legislation in relation to the regulation of the construction standards, etc. of fishing vessels of >24m. Ireland ratified the Torremolinos Protocol and applies the requirements as contained in Directive 97/70/EC. Therefore for fishing vessels >24m, a higher level of regulation is maintained for such Irish fishing vessels or foreign-flagged fishing vessels in Irish waters compared to the level of regulation that is set out in the Cape Town Agreement. However, Ireland recognises that ratifying the Agreement will help towards reaching the threshold for its entry into force which would eventu-

ally lead to increased safety standards for fishing vessels >24m around the world.

In summary, the position on the Cape Town Agreement is that Ireland should and will ratify the Agreement to assist in the push towards reaching the threshold for its entry into force. However, primary legislation is required to ratify the Agreement. It is intended to include provisions regarding the Agreement in the next Merchant Shipping Bill that deals with international conventions.

### **Public Services Provision**

197. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9842/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Department of Transport has not won an award from the Public Sector Magazine.

### **Driver Licences**

198. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport if he will examine the regulations in respect of driver licences; if he will consider making a variation to categories (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9848/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Group 1 vehicles include cars (B categories) and motorbikes (A categories). Group 2 vehicles include trucks (C categories) and buses (D categories)

The categories of vehicles are set at European level. The EU Driving Licence Directives, on which national legislation is based, set out the requirements for obtaining a driving licence in each category, such as age limits, fitness to drive and training and testing standards. Applicants for a category of licence that comes under Group 2, which includes category C1, are required to meet a higher level of training and testing, and must provide a medical report to support their fitness to drive.

### **Public Transport**

199. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Transport if the 20% cut in public transport fares announced recently will apply to public service obligation routes which are operated under direct contract between a private operator and the National Transport Authority, rather than via the Rural Transport Programme and LocalLink such as Route 975 Cavan-Longford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9910/22]

200. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Transport if public transport services are obliged to offer reduced rates for return, weekly and monthly journeys to all fare-paying passengers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9911/22]

201. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to enable the use of Leap card payments on public transport services given the massive reduction in cash usage over the past two years given that this function is not available on LocalLink services and most private operators with contracts with the National Transport Authority in counties Cavan and

Monaghan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9912/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 199 to 201, inclusive, together.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport; I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport, nor decisions on fares. It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) that has responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services, provided under public service obligation (PSO) contracts.

The Government is strongly committed to helping combat the rising cost-of-living being experienced throughout the country. In this context, a suite of new measures is being introduced by Government to help with this issue, including a 20% average fare reduction on PSO services until the end of 2022. These discounted fares will benefit the hundreds of thousands of people across the country who use public transport every day. A further €54m in Exchequer funding has been secured to allow for the introduction of these discounted fares, this is in addition to the REV22 allocations.

The NTA will work with the public transport operators in the coming weeks to commence rolling out these fare reductions across the public transport network in April/May. In light of the NTA's responsibility in this area, I have forwarded the Deputy's specific questions in relation to the particular types of services and routes involved in the scheme along with the use of Leap card payments on public transport services, to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

*Question No. 200 answered with Question No. 199.*

*Question No. 201 answered with Question No. 199.*

### **Public Transport**

202. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he has examined the introduction of more flexibility for ten-journey tickets on public service obligation routes by, for example, increasing the expiry date of the ten journey ticket, taking into account commuters new work patterns which mean they might only be travelling a few times a week; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9945/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport; I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport, nor decisions on fares. It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) that has responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services, provided under public service obligation (PSO) contracts

In light of the Authority's responsibility in this area, I have forwarded the Deputy's specific question in relation to the examination of introducing more flexibility for ten-journey tickets on PSO routes, to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Departmental Communications**

203. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport if he uses an application on his

official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9969/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Minister Ryan does have WhatsApp on his official Government phone. He does not have the setting in question activated.

### **Driver Test**

204. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons who are awaiting a driving test appointment; the breakdown by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9974/22]

205. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons who are awaiting a motorcycle test appointment; the breakdown by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9975/22]

206. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons who are awaiting a car theory test appointment; the breakdown by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9976/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 204 to 206, inclusive, together.

Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is responsible for the operation of driving tests.

I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's query to the RSA for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

*Question No. 205 answered with Question No. 204.*

*Question No. 206 answered with Question No. 204.*

### **Driver Test**

207. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the steps that are being taken to clear the backlog of driving test appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9977/22]

208. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the steps that are being taken to clear the backlog of motorcycle test appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9978/22]

213. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the difficulties that have led to delays in motorcycle tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10018/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 207, 208 and 213 together.

Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is responsible for the operation of the national driving test service.

While Covid 19 had a profound effect on the operation of the service, the RSA is putting

every possible measure in place to ensure that the maximum number of customers can be served while complying with Covid public health guidance. To meet the demand for tests, approval has been given to significantly increase the capacity of the service through the recruitment and extension of a number of existing driver tester contracts. This, and the introduction of a new booking system for tests, have had a noticeable impact on reducing Covid waiting list backlogs.

Pre-pandemic, the average waiting time target for a driving test was ten weeks, although on the immediate eve of the pandemic the actual waiting time was around six and a half weeks. This increased to 25 weeks during the Pandemic. With the improving public health situation, the pre-pandemic average national waiting time target of ten weeks was achieved in the last few weeks.

*Question No. 208 answered with Question No. 207.*

### **Traffic Management**

209. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the Finglas roundabouts scheme; the funding streams for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9995/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public and sustainable transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) is responsible for the development and implementation of public transport and active travel infrastructure, allocating the funding provided by my Department at project level and working in conjunction with the relevant local authorities. This includes the project mentioned by the Deputy, namely the Finglas roundabouts scheme.

Noting the NTA's responsibilities in the matter, I have referred your question to the NTA for a detailed reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Legislative Measures**

210. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport when he expects the Road Traffic and Roads Bill to deal with MPVs to be enacted into law; when he expects to publish the Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9997/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** As the Deputy is aware, there are several factors involved in the timing of legislation, not all of them within ministerial control.

The Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021 passed second stage on 18 November 2021. I hope shortly to have a number of amendments to the Bill finalized for proposal at Committee stage. When this is done, I shall engage with the Committee with a view to beginning Committee stage as soon as possible. Further to that, timing depends on the availability of time in the Committee, and the availability of time for report and final stages in the Dáil, and for all stages in the Seanad. In addition, the amount of time each stage in each House is difficult to predict.

I am hopeful, however, that the Bill can pass all stages in the Oireachtas before the end of May.

## Air Services

211. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the engagement he has had with Shannon Airport regarding upgrading the airport infrastructure and maximising its use in the context of the Ryder Cup 2027. [10024/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I would like to thank the Deputy for asking this question.

Shannon Group is continually reviewing the Airport infrastructure and the development of opportunities to enhance its facilities for passengers using the Airport. The Ryder Cup 2027 will benefit the Airport and boost the regional economy, and Shannon Airport are preparing for the increase in Airport traffic the event will bring.

My Department has supported the Airport by providing €11.6m in funding under the Regional State Airports Programme 2021, including €6.1m in capital funding. Emergency capital supports of €5.35m were also provided for the Airport's Hold Baggage Screening and Embankments projects. These funding allocations are intended to build and develop the Airport's business for the future, including meeting the increased traffic anticipated in the lead up to the Ryder Cup in 2027.

## Driver Test

212. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons awaiting a motorcycle test, per county, in tabular form. [10017/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is responsible for the operation of these tests. I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's query to the RSA for direct reply.

I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

*Question No. 213 answered with Question No. 207.*

## Bus Services

214. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the criteria that are applied to add bus stops to Bus Éireann routes in rural areas. [10060/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the provision of bus stops.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

## Legislative Measures

215. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to regulate e-scooters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10125/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Electric scooters are a type of powered personal transporter (PPT). PPTs are classed as mechanically propelled vehicles, the use of which requires a valid licence, tax and appropriate insurance in accordance with Section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1961. As PPTs do not fall under any existing vehicle category, it is not currently possible to tax and insure them and there is no separate licence category for them and they may not be used on public roads and in public places. However, their use is permitted on private land, with the permission of the landowner. While their use on public roads (including footways) is illegal, I am aware that there has been some confusion over the legal constraints on their use.

It is intended to legislate for e-scooters in accordance with the Programme for Government as soon as possible, so that they may be used on our roads within a clear legal framework. Provision has been made for this in the Road Traffic and Roads Bill, which has completed second stage in the Dail and is due to go to committee stage shortly.

In order to allow for the rapid pace of technological change in this area, specific controls on the use of e-scooters will be set out in regulations, following the passage of the Bill through the Oireachtas. The use of e-scooters on public roads will become legal only once these regulations are in place.

### **Bus Services**

216. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the number and locations of sheltered bus stops installed in each county since 1 January 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10126/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the provision of bus stops and bus shelters.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

### **Bus Services**

217. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the number and locations of bus stops that are not wheelchair accessible in each county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10127/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding for public transport, whereas it is the National Transport Authority (NTA) that has statutory responsibility for promoting the development of an integrated, accessible public transport network.

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

## Tax Reliefs

218. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Finance if he will re-evaluate the bike to work scheme to cover replacement batteries for e-bikes; if there are plans to expand the back to work scheme for e-bikes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9078/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 118(5G) of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA 1997) provides for the ‘Cycle to Work’ scheme. This scheme provides an exemption from benefit-in-kind (BIK) where an employer purchases a bicycle and associated safety equipment for an employee.

Under section 118B TCA 1997 an employer and employee may also enter into a salary sacrifice arrangement under which the employee agrees to sacrifice part of his or her salary, in exchange for a bicycle and related safety equipment.

Where a bicycle or safety equipment is being purchased under the ‘Cycle to Work’ scheme or through a salary sacrifice arrangement certain conditions must be met. Among these conditions is the requirement that the bicycle must meet the definition of a ‘pedal cycle’.

A ‘pedal cycle’ means:

- A bicycle or tricycle which is intended or adapted for propulsion solely by the physical exertions of a person or persons seated thereon, or
- A pedelec, being a bicycle or tricycle which is equipped with an auxiliary electric motor having a maximum continuous rated power of 0.25 kilo-watts, of which output is progressively reduced and finally cut off as the bicycle reaches a speed of 25 kilometres per hour, or sooner if the cyclist stops pedalling.

The Deputy will be aware that the Financial Provisions (Covid-19)(No.2) Act 2020 increased the exemption limit from €1,000 to €1,250 or, in the case of electric bikes, to €1,500 for employer expenditure on the provision of bicycles and associated safety equipment, and also enabled employees to avail of the scheme more frequently (once in a four year period instead of five years).

The expansion of any scheme to cover additional items, such as replacement batteries for e-bikes, creates a cost and that cost must be recovered elsewhere. While the scheme is kept under review by officials, there are no plans at present to change the scope of the scheme.

Further information on the cycle to work scheme can be found on Revenue’s website.

## Tax Yield

219. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of revenue raised by VAT, by quarter, in each of the years 2015 to 2021. [9108/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The detail of the amount of revenue raised by VAT by quarter from 2015 to 2021 is listed in the table below.

Period	VAT €m
2015 Q1	3,797.39
2015 Q2	2,202.39

Period	VAT €m
2015 Q3	3,701.61
2015 Q4	2,242.65
2016 Q1	3,894.97
2016 Q2	2,324.08
2016 Q3	3,972.40
2016 Q4	2,229.03
2017 Q1	4,567.84
2017 Q2	2,337.82
2017 Q3	4,112.64
2017 Q4	2,284.79
2018 Q1	4,675.98
2018 Q2	2,424.72
2018 Q3	4,469.94
2018 Q4	2,663.70
2019 Q1	4,985.53
2019 Q2	2,460.32
2019 Q3	4,866.67
2019 Q4	2,805.09
2020 Q1	4,137.14
2020 Q2	1,784.21
2020 Q3	3,947.10
2020 Q4	2,555.11
2021 Q1	4,484.07
2021 Q2	2,719.39
2021 Q3	5,235.55
2021 Q4	3,002.09

### Tax Yield

220. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of revenue raised from excise duty on energy products and electricity, by quarter, in each of the years 2015 to 2021. [9109/22]

221. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of revenue raised from VAT on energy products and electricity, by quarter, in each of the years 2015 to 2021. [9110/22]

222. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of revenue raised from the carbon tax, by quarter, in each of the years 2010 to 2021. [9111/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 220 to 222, inclusive, together.

I am advised by Revenue that the available information in relation to Carbon Taxes, Electricity Tax, Excise on oils and fuels, and VAT on energy products and electricity is presented in the table below.

As traders are not required to identify the VAT from the supply of specific services on their (VAT) returns, the VAT on energy products and electricity is estimated on an annual basis. For Electricity Tax, the majority of this is returned to Revenue in the first quarter of the year, therefore an annual amount is provided. The following table gives the figures in € millions.

Year	Quarter	Carbon Taxes	Electricity Tax (full year)	Oils/Fuels Excise Duty	VAT (full year)
2021	Q1	€147.8	€5.2	€387.4	€911
2021	Q2	€170.6		€468.2	
2021	Q3	€150.1		€530.7	
2021	Q4	€183.3		€540.5	
2020	Q1	€137.6	€2.1	€513.0	€874
2020	Q2	€114.9		€351.6	
2020	Q3	€104.3		€477.9	
2020	Q4	€136.7		€472.5	
2019	Q1	€112.7	€2.3	€507.8	€933
2019	Q2	€108.6		€557.0	
2019	Q3	€90.4		€547.8	
2019	Q4	€118.7		€551.7	
2018	Q1	€120.5	€2.5	€513.1	€951
2018	Q2	€117.2		€550.8	
2018	Q3	€89.1		€548.3	
2018	Q4	€104.3		€551.1	
2017	Q1	€117.8	€3.6	€417.4	€899
2017	Q2	€115.8		€557.9	
2017	Q3	€89.1		€550.8	
2017	Q4	€96.9		€535.0	
2016	Q1	€110.4	€4.6	€599.4	€911
2016	Q2	€124.2		€557.1	
2016	Q3	€89.1		€549.8	
2016	Q4	€106.6		€467.2	

*Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 220.*

*Question No. 222 answered with Question No. 220.*

### **Insurance Industry**

223. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider legislative changes to monitor the passing on of savings from insurers to consumers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8772/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I note that the question refers to the impact of the Personal Injuries Guidelines on insurance premiums. At the outset, I would like to point out that there is no single solution to reducing insurance costs. This is why the Govern-

ment is pursuing insurance reform on a whole-of-Government basis, through 66 cross-departmental actions in the Insurance Reform Action Plan, including, but not limited to, the Personal Injuries Guidelines.

The National Claims Information Database (NCID) has already proven to be an excellent tool when it comes to collecting information on the cost of claims and pricing trends. The NCID will continue to contribute to evidence-based decision making and will help to provide greater market-focussed transparency in the insurance sector.

The Central Bank indicated in its most recent NCID Motor Report that it intends to collect additional claim settlement data for all classes of business within the remit of the NCID so as to obtain further information on the impact of the Personal Injuries Guidelines on claims settlement. I understand that it intends to collect data that will allow it to distinguish claims settled under the new Guidelines from those settled under previous arrangements (i.e. the Book of Quantum), which will provide insight into the impact of the Guidelines on settling claims.

In light of these proposed enhancements, I believe that the NCID remains an effective mechanism to objectively monitor whether savings arising from the Guidelines, as well as the suite of other reform measures being pursued by this Government, are being passed on to customers. Accordingly, no further legislative changes are necessitated at this point.

### **Tax Reliefs**

224. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the cost to the Exchequer of tax relief on pension contributions in 2019, disaggregated by salary band in intervals of €10,000, in tabular form. [9140/22]

225. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons who availed of tax relief on pension contributions in 2019, disaggregated by salary band in intervals of €10,000, in tabular form. [9141/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 224 and 225 together.

I am advised by Revenue that the available information in relation to the cost of tax relief on pension contributions is available on the Revenue website at: [www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/costs-tax-expenditures.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/costs-tax-expenditures.pdf).

The information includes the number of taxpayers availing of the relief as well as the total cost, broken down by year up to 2018, the latest year for which data are currently available.

The information at the link reflects the totals for each year. Information on pension contributions at individual (employee) level was not separately recorded on tax returns prior to 2019. However, following changes to the PAYE system, the information sought by the Deputy will become available in the coming weeks for 2019 and for subsequent years as soon as possible thereafter. The data will be published on the Revenue website once available.

*Question No. 225 answered with Question No. 224.*

### **Tax Rebates**

226. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance when a rebate will issue to

a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9145/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I can confirm that this fuel grant claim was processed and paid as part of second claim file for January and should be with the claimant now.

*Question No. 227 answered with Question No. 42.*

*Question No. 228 answered with Question No. 14.*

### **Tax Credits**

229. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department will examine a situation (details supplied) and the issues it raises for parents in a similar situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9184/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Single Person Child Carer Credit (SPCCC) is a tax credit that is available to a single person who has a qualifying child resident with him or her for the whole or greater part of the tax year and who satisfies the other conditions of the relief. To qualify as a single person for the purposes of the SPCCC, the claimant must not be jointly assessed for income tax as a married person or civil partner, or be living with his or her spouse or civil partner, or be cohabiting with a partner.

The value of the credit is €1,650 for each tax year. In addition to the credit, a claimant is entitled to an additional €4,000 on the standard rate income tax band. An individual can only receive one SPCCC irrespective of the number of qualifying children residing with him or her.

The credit is ordinarily given to the primary claimant. The primary claimant is the individual who proves that a qualifying child resides with him or her for the whole or the greater part of the tax year (i.e. a period greater than six months) and that the child is either his or her own or has been placed in his or her custody. A primary claimant can relinquish entitlement to the SPCCC to a secondary claimant. The secondary claimant can then claim the credit if he or she qualifies as a single person and the qualifying child resides with him or her for at least 100 days throughout the tax year. Detailed information on the SPCCC can be found on Revenue's website at: [www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-41.pdf](http://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-41.pdf), which may be of interest to the Deputy.

I am advised by Revenue that it has reviewed the changed circumstances of the person in question and is satisfied that he now has full custody of one child while continuing to share custody for the second child and on that basis is entitled to claim the credit as a primary claimant. Revenue has confirmed that it will make direct contact with the person to assist him with the application process and to clarify any other questions that he may have.

*Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 24.*

### **Tax Code**

231. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to change the measure whereby a childless, single person can only leave substantially less to a sibling, niece or nephew free of inheritance tax than to a son or daughter, who can inherit €335,000 from a parent before paying the tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9267/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, for Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT) purposes, the relationship between the person giving a gift or inheritance (i.e. the disponent) and the person who receives it (i.e. the beneficiary) determines the maximum amount, known as the “Group threshold”, below which CAT does not arise.

The Group A threshold (currently €335,000) applies, inter alia, where the beneficiary is a child (including adopted child, stepchild and certain foster children) of the disponent. The Group B threshold (currently €32,500) applies where the beneficiary is a brother, sister, nephew, niece or lineal ancestor or lineal descendant such as a grandchild of the disponent. The Group C threshold (currently €16,250) applies in all other cases.

Any prior gift or inheritance received by a beneficiary since 5 December 1991 from within the same Group threshold is aggregated for the purposes of determining whether any tax is payable on a benefit. Where a person receives gifts or inheritances that are in excess of his or her relevant tax-free threshold, CAT at a rate of 33% applies on the excess benefit.

While a disponent may have no natural children, any stepchildren, adopted children or certain foster children can avail of the Group A threshold in respect of gifts and inheritances received from that disponent.

In addition, nieces or nephews of that disponent may qualify for favourite niece or favourite nephew relief in respect of gifts or inheritances of business assets. The relief allows a niece or nephew who qualifies for the relief to avail of the Group A threshold. Qualifying nieces or nephews are those who have worked substantially on a full-time basis for a period of five years prior to the gift or inheritance being given in carrying on, or assisting in the carrying on, the trade, business or profession, of the disponent.

For the nephew or niece to be deemed to be working substantially on a full-time basis in the business he or she must work:

- more than 24 hours per week at the place where the business, trade or profession is carried on; or

- more than 15 hours per week at the place where the business, trade or profession is carried on exclusively by the disponent, any spouse or civil partner of the disponent and the nephew or niece.

The options available for providing increases to CAT thresholds are considered in the context of available resources as part of the annual budgetary process and like all matters need to be balanced against competing demands. At the moment, I do not believe that a compelling case can be made for increasing the CAT Group threshold that applies to a sibling, niece or nephew.

## **Tax Reliefs**

232. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance the total spend related to the special assignee relief programme in each of the years 2020 and 2021. [9309/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Finance Act 2012 introduced section 825C to the Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997. This section, as amended, provides Income Tax relief for certain individuals assigned during any of the tax years 2012 to 2022 to work in the State. The relief is commonly known as SARP (Special Assignee Relief Programme).

The aim of the relief is to reduce the cost to employers of assigning skilled individuals in

their companies from abroad to take up positions in the Irish-based operations of their employer or an associated company, thereby facilitating the creation of jobs and the development and expansion of businesses in Ireland.

SARP provides for relief from Income Tax on 30% of income over €75,000, subject to an upper income threshold of €1,000,000, where applicable. There is no exemption from USC. PRSI is payable where the individual is not liable to social insurance contributions in his or her home country. School fees of up to €5,000 per annum and expenses incurred on one trip home per year, where they are paid for by the employer, are not subject to Income Tax, USC or PRSI.

I am advised that the latest costs available for the Special Assignee Relief Programme (SARP) can be found in the 2019 SARP report which is published on the Revenue website and as part of the Budget 2022 Tax Expenditures Report on the Government's Budget 2022 website.

The cost of SARP for 2018 and 2019 (the latest year for which data are available) is set out below.

SARP	2018	2019
Cost (€m)	42.4	38.2

I expect that figures in relation to 2020 will be published later this year and that figures in respect of 2021 will become available next year.

### Tax Exemptions

233. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration has been given to raising the age threshold for stamp duty exemption with particular reference to the next Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, period, land mobility ambition and for farmers who did not avail of green certificate courses during Covid-19 due to pandemic circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9323/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** My Department carried out a review of the age limits applicable to four agri-tax reliefs last year. The findings of this review are set out as part of the Report on Tax Expenditures 2021 which was published on 12th October on the Gov.ie website as part of the package of papers associated with Budget 2022.

The four agri-tax reliefs/tax credits covered, where eligibility is (amongst other factors) determined subject to an age limit, are:

1. Stock relief for young trained farmers (section 667B of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997)
2. Stock relief for registered farm partnerships (section 667C of the TCA 1997)
3. Succession Farm Partnerships (Tax Credit) (section 667D of the TCA 1997)
4. Young trained farmer (stamp duty) relief (section 81AA of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999)

The report found that the age limits currently in place for each of these are consistent amongst themselves, and that they remain appropriate in the context of their intended purpose.

It also noted that introducing special exemptions from those age limits, even in limited circumstances would both add complexity to, and weaken the intended impact of, the age limits currently in place.

The report therefore recommended that no changes in the age limits applicable to the four reliefs concerned be recommended to me.

In relation to the situation that was applicable over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, I am informed that, as with many other businesses, providers of the Green Cert. responded to the impact of the pandemic with contingency arrangements to ensure continuity of service.

Teagasc continued to deliver existing Level 5 and Level 6 green cert programmes in agricultural colleges and regional centres in accordance with the national Covid-19 guidelines for provision of further and higher education. Contingencies were introduced in line with QQI guidance which enabled Teagasc programmes (full-time, distance education and part-time) to maintain their schedule of delivery. This included increased use of online learning technology to support teaching and learning in addition to on-campus skills training.

Teagasc also continued to recruit students and has commenced a number of new green cert programmes nationwide over the past two years, with over 30 part-time/distance education green cert courses commencing during 2021 alone.

I therefore see no need to provide any extension of, or exemption from, the age limits currently in effect.

### **Customs and Excise**

234. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider increasing the threshold for the value of gifts received from outside of the European Union before customs will be charged (details supplied); if he will investigate this anomaly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9336/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the provisions for the relief of Customs Duty and VAT for gifts sent from one private individual in a non-EU country to another private individual in Ireland are set out in European legislation and it is not a matter on which Ireland can determine or apply separate provisions. The relief for gifts is agreed and harmonised at EU level and the provisions are common throughout the 27 EU Member States.

Under EU legislation, the relief of Customs Duty and VAT for gifts applies where the Customs Value of the consignment sent is less than €45. The Customs value is the value of the item plus the cost of transport and insurance. This also includes the cost of postage where consignments are sent via the postal network. Where the value of the gifts imported from outside of the European Union exceeds this €45 threshold, then the applicable rates of Customs Duty and VAT apply.

*Question No. 235 answered with Question No. 42.*

### **Tax Code**

236. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department is considering reducing the VAT rate to 9% for dry-cleaning businesses in line with all other sectors of the hospitality industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9429/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law, with which Irish

VAT law must comply. In general, the EU VAT Directive provides that all goods and services are liable to VAT at the standard rate, unless they fall within categories of goods and services specified in Annex III of the VAT Directive, in respect of which Member States may apply a lower rate from VAT. The scope under the VAT Directive to apply a 9% rate is limited to certain categories, including tourism and hospitality related goods and services, but this does not include dry-cleaning and laundry services, which remain liable at the 13.5% rate.

### **Pension Provisions**

237. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the transposition of the pan-European personal pension product regulation; the expected timeline for the transposition of the regulation into Irish law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9505/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The objective of the Pan-European Personal Pension Product Regulation is to lay the foundations for a safer, more cost-efficient and transparent market in affordable and voluntary personal pension savings that can be managed on a pan-European scale. It is envisaged that the PEPP framework will constitute a complementary voluntary scheme alongside national regimes.

The European Commission proposal for a Pan-European Personal Pension Product was adopted by Council in 2019. Separately, the Level II Regulatory Technical Standards were approved by Council and published in March 2021. Accordingly, the Pan-European Personal Pension Product Regulation is scheduled to enter into application on 22 March 2022 - a year from the publication of the technical standards.

My Department had domestic responsibility for negotiating this file and has engaged with key domestic stakeholders such as the Department of Social Protection, the Pensions Authority, the Central Bank of Ireland and the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, as well as with market participants, as part of the negotiation process.

Work is ongoing on the necessary transposition with a view to completing the work within the time-frame and my Department will keep the EU authorities updated on progress. The first PEPP products may be expected to come to markets with the EU this year. Providers and distributors will follow the normal approval process through the relevant national authorities to ensure they and their products comply with the necessary requirements.

### **Tax Reliefs**

238. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications made to the disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme in each of the years from 2018 to and including 2021. [9530/22]

239. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications made for the primary medical certificate with respect to the disabled drivers and disabled passengers' scheme in each of the years from 2018 to and including 2021; the number of applications rejected in each of those years; the number of applications that were rejected and subsequently appealed to the disabled drivers medical board of appeal; and the number of those appeals which were rejected or accepted in tabular form. [9531/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 238 and 239 together.

The Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme (DDS) provides relief from VRT and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant.

The Scheme is open to severely and permanently disabled persons who also meet one of six specified medical criteria, as a driver or as a passenger and also to certain organisations. In order to qualify for relief, the applicant must hold a Primary Medical Certificate issued by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer (SAMO) or a Board Medical Certificate issued by the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal. Certain other qualifying criteria apply in relation to the vehicle, in particular that it must be specially constructed or adapted for use by the applicant. In the event that a PMC is not granted by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer an appeal may be made to the independent Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal (DDMBA) who operate out of the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dun Laoghaire.

The number of applications for a Primary Medical Certificate and the number of those that were successful are a matter for the HSE. The below table outlines the PMC assessment data for 2021 as recently supplied by the HSE.

**Primary Medical Certificates - data at December 2021**

CHO Area	Number of applications for a primary medical certificate received in 2021	Number of applications for a primary medical certificate approved in 2021	Number of applications for a primary medical certificate which were not approved (application not successful) in 2021	Number of people waiting to be assessed for a primary medical certificate at December 2021
CHO 1	285	170	80	75
CHO 2	498	430	247	46
CHO 3	401	229	172	87
CHO 4	680	287	315	82
CHO 5	309	149	97	63
CHO 6	170	125	40	5
CHO 7	241	135	108	21
CHO 8	440	232	134	69
CHO 9	249	186	49	5
Total	3,273	1,943	1,242	453

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CHO 9	249	186	49	5
Total	3,273	1,943	1,242	453

The below table outlines the number of appeals heard by the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal and, of those, the numbers that were successful and unsuccessful.

Disabled Drivers Scheme	2018	2019	2020	2021
New appeals	674	684	204	382
Number of Appeals Assessed	386	424	116	148
Number of Successful Appeals	20	9	4	12
Number of Unsuccessful Appeals	366	415	112	136

\*260 appeals outstanding at 01/2017

\*\*Appeal hearings were lower than usual for 2020 due to both public health considerations and the Supreme Court Case in June 2020. Appeal hearings resumed in early 2021 following an amendment to the Finance Bill to provide for the existing medical criteria in primary legislation which, following the approval of the Finance Act 2020, allowed assessments to recommence.

\*\*\*2021 appeal hearings have also been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Question No. 239 answered with Question No. 238.*

## Tax Reliefs

240. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the annual cost of the disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme to the Exchequer in each of the years 2016 to 2021. [9555/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme (DDS) provides relief from VRT and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant.

The Scheme is open to severely and permanently disabled persons who also meet one of

six specified medical criteria, as a driver or as a passenger and also to certain organisations. In order to qualify for relief, the applicant must hold a Primary Medical Certificate issued by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer (SAMO) or a Board Medical Certificate issued by the Disabled Driver Medical Board of Appeal. Certain other qualifying criteria apply in relation to the vehicle, in particular that it must be specially constructed or adapted for use by the applicant. In the event that a PMC is not granted by the relevant Senior Area Medical Officer an appeal may be made to the independent Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal (DDMBA) who operate out of the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dun Laoghaire.

The table below outlines the costs of the DDS Scheme and the Fuel Grant Scheme for the years 2016-2021. These figures do not include the revenue foregone in respect of the relief from Motor Tax provided to members of the Scheme.

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Cost of scheme (€ m)	65	65	70	72	67	68

### Departmental Advertising

241. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Finance the amount that his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9574/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I can advise the Deputy that the Department of Finance has no record of any payments for advertisements or content in the publication mentioned.

*Question No. 242 answered with Question No. 14.*

### Tax Exemptions

243. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications for exemption from income tax in respect of certain payments made under employment law as updated in May 2021; the number of applications approved; the number refused and the number granted upon appeal by the relevant Act in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9600/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** It is my understanding that the Deputy is referring to section 192A of the Tax Consolidation Act 1997, which deals with exemptions in respect of certain payments made by employers to employees arising from claims under employment law.

Section 192A provides that compensation payments made to an employee will be exempt from income tax, universal social charge and PRSI in instances where the employee's statutory rights or entitlements, or an employer's obligations under employment legislation, have been infringed or breached.

The exemption provided for by section 192A applies to payments arising out of claims made under a "relevant Act" following a formal hearing before a "relevant authority", on foot of a recommendation, decision, or determination by that relevant authority. The exemption also applies to payments made under an out of court settlement, in place of a formal hearing before a relevant authority, which has been agreed between an employee and his or her employer, subject to certain conditions being met.

I am advised by Revenue that its Tax Duty Manual Part 07-01-27 - Exemption from Income Tax in respect of Certain Payments made under Employment Law offers extensive guidance on the application of this exemption.

The update in May 2021 referred to in the question relates to an amendment to the aforementioned Tax Duty Manual, where paragraph 4 “Out of Court Settlements” was updated to outline on what information should be included in such a settlement agreement and the format it should take – “the format of the employee’s original statement of claim, which must be evidenced in writing, and the details to be included in same, will vary depending on the facts and circumstances of each individual case. However, such written documentation may reasonably be expected to include information such as the nature of the claim, the nature of the relationship between the parties involved or a high-level summary of the allegations and the impact of same. The employee need not engage an external advisor to prepare such written documentation on their behalf and there is no requirement for the statement of claim to have been formally submitted to a relevant Authority, provided all other conditions set out above are met.”

Where payments are made under the provisions of section 192A, generally a self-assessment approach applies and Revenue approval is not obligatory. However, it is possible for an employer to seek Revenue approval if there is any doubt as to the application of the exemption. As there is no formal application or approval process, Revenue advise that the details requested are not available. However, it is important to note however, that where such payments to employees are encountered during the course of a Revenue compliance intervention, details of the payment would be examined to ensure they meet the requirements of the legislation.

### Tax Code

244. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to abolish the prohibitive VAT rate on defibrillators; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9648/22]

250. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in relation to the removal of VAT on defibrillators will be examined; the status of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9729/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 244 and 250 together.

As the Deputies will be aware, the EU Commission published a proposal on the reform of VAT rates in January 2018 which would allow Member States more flexibility in how they apply VAT rates. The compromise text agreed at ECOFIN in December has been amended significantly in comparison to the original proposal so the EU Parliament will once again be consulted for their opinion.

Once the Parliament has issued its opinion on the proposal, the Council will formally adopt the directive. It will then enter into force on the twentieth day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.

In the interim officials in my Department will be reviewing the options now available to Ireland in setting VAT rates. Future tax changes are generally taken in the context of the Budget. Deputies will be aware that my officials prepare a series of papers containing tax options for the Tax Strategy Group to be considered in the context of the budgetary process, alongside a wide range of submissions from various stakeholders and lobby groups.

245. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide an update on the status of the universal social charge; if there are plans to abolish or substantially reduce the universal social charge or incorporate it into the wider taxation system such as PRSI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9270/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The USC was designed and incorporated into the Irish taxation system in 2011 to replace two other charges, namely the Health and Income Levies. Its primary purpose was to widen the tax base and to provide a steady income to the Exchequer to provide funding for public services.

The USC is an individualised tax, meaning that a person's liability to the tax is determined on the basis of his/her own individual income and personal circumstances. The USC is applied at a low rate on a wide base, which ensures that it is a stable and sustainable source of revenue for the State.

Currently individuals with incomes of less than €13,000 are exempt from USC. For 2022, it is estimated that 28% of all taxpayer units will be exempt from USC. I would also note that in recent Budgets, including Budget 2022, this Government actively increased the USC ceiling for the 2% rate in line with increases to the national minimum wage, to ensure that a full-time adult worker who benefits from the increase in the hourly minimum wage rate would remain outside the top rates of USC.

The USC has played a vital part in meeting the many expenditure demands placed on the Exchequer. USC receipts have been central to the current stability of the public finances since March 2020, despite the challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Receipts from the USC in 2021 amounted to €4.4 billion – 16.5% of total income tax receipts or 6.4% of total Exchequer receipts. The projected USC yield for 2022 is broadly similar. If USC were to be abolished, it would be necessary to raise approximately €4.4 billion from other sources.

In 2016, joint Department of Finance/Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research found that USC represented a more stable form of revenue than income tax. The findings highlighted that USC revenues would fluctuate by less than income tax revenues whenever income is volatile, for example where the economy moves from a boom into a bust. Given the openness of the Irish economy and consequent susceptibility to economic shocks, the contribution that the USC makes to the stability of the State's revenue sources is considerable.

The Deputy may wish to note that an inter-departmental working group was established in February 2018 to examine and report on options for the amalgamation of USC and PRSI over the medium-term. The Report of the Working Group can be located here: [//assets.gov.ie/180893/1c9cd219-fb8a-47d2-86c3-d1cd9c3bcf03.pdf](https://assets.gov.ie/180893/1c9cd219-fb8a-47d2-86c3-d1cd9c3bcf03.pdf).

The report acknowledged the complexity of the amalgamation proposal and confirmed that there is no single option that can deliver the proposed amalgamation without leading to implications at the individual level, with some people paying more, or significant loss of Revenue for the State overall. In the light of the information brought forward in the report, the proposal has not been pursued.

The Deputy refers to the concept of incorporating the USC into the wider taxation system. I have already referred to the examination of USC/PRSI above. Another idea might be to incorporate the USC into the personal income tax system and, on the face of it, a single unified income

tax system may appear to offer advantages as compared with current arrangements. However, many of the significant challenges outlined in “The Report of the Working Group on the Amalgamation of USC and PRSI”, published in September 2018, remain valid in the context of an amalgamation of USC and Income Tax.

There are no plans at present to carry out any further analysis on the proposal suggested by the Deputy.

Ireland has one of the most progressive personal income tax systems in the world, which plays a crucial role in the process of income redistribution. Our redistributive tax system has been acknowledged by the IMF, the OECD and the ESRI. In my view, a broad-based, progressive income tax system, where the majority of income earners make some contribution but according to their means, is the most fair and sustainable income tax system in the long term.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

246. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance the most up-to-date estimated cost of Covid-19-related support schemes introduced by Government from March 2019 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9271/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In relation to Covid-19 support schemes under the aegis of my Department, I am advised by Revenue that the total cost of the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) as of 17 February is €727m which has been paid in respect of 25,600 premises.

In terms of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), currently 24,900 employers are registered with Revenue for EWSS. €6.454 billion in subsidies has been paid to 51,900 employers in respect of 715,300 Employees under the Scheme. An additional €1.009 billion in employer PRSI has been forgone due to the reduced rate of PRSI on wages paid which are eligible for EWSS.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was in place from 26 March to 31 August 2020. The cost to the Exchequer of the Scheme over that period is just under €2.9 billion.

At end January 2022, there were 105,000 individual businesses availing of the Tax Debt Warehousing scheme, including 3,200 Large Cases and Medium Enterprises Divisions taxpayers. Warehoused liabilities stood at €3.2bn, this figure includes VAT (€1,496m), Employers' PAYE (€1,592m), Income Tax (€59m) and TWSS / EWSS (€57m).

The Business Resumption Support Scheme (BRSS) was in place from 6 September 2021 to 30 November 2021. 2,150 businesses with 2,300 trades have availed of BRSS and €6.8 million has been paid under the Scheme.

The Deputy may wish to note that Revenue publishes detailed statistics on its website each week on the operation of COVID-19 support schemes including totals claimed to date.

### **Tax Reliefs**

247. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 145 of 16 December 2021, his plans for the phasing out of the special assignee relief programme, which has a sunset date of 31 December 2022; the total cost to the Exchequer of the programme in 2020 and 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9725/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As stated in my reply to the Deputy on 16 December last, as the Special Assignee Relief Programme (SARP) sunsets this year, there will be an opportunity for review. Any decisions on the future of SARP arising from this review will be taken in the context of the Budget 2023 and Finance Bill 2022 processes.

With regard to the total cost to the Exchequer of SARP in 2020 and 2021, I am advised that the latest costs available can be found in the 2019 SARP report which is published on the Revenue website and as part of the Budget 2022 Tax Expenditures Report on the Government's Budget 2022 website.

The cost of SARP for 2018 and 2019 (the latest year for which data are available) is set out below.

SARP	2018	2019
Cost (€m)	42.4	38.2

I expect that data in relation to 2020 will become available later this year and that data in relation to 2021 will be available in 2023.

*Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 49.*

### Credit Unions

249. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the review of the policy framework for credit unions; the timeline for the publication of the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9728/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Programme for Government includes a number of commitments in relation to the credit union sector. Work on the Review of the Policy Framework is well advanced. We intend to discuss proposals emanating from the Review with representative bodies in the next few weeks.

As part of the Review of the Policy Framework, Minister of State Fleming has conducted extensive stakeholder engagement, meeting with the representative bodies, collaborative ventures, service providers, the Credit Union Advisory Committee, the Registrar of Credit Unions and individual credit unions. The information gained from these meetings will help inform the next steps taken by Government.

In terms of supporting the sector to provide essential financial services to local communities, the following are some recent developments which highlight the potential of the sector to grow and fulfil a role in relation to community banking.

#### Lending and Investment

The Central Bank has in recent years reviewed both the lending and investment frameworks. Since 1 January 2020, credit unions now have a combined capacity to provide up to €1.1 billion in additional SME and mortgage loans, with further capacity available to credit unions who can comply with certain conditions or on approval by the Central Bank. As of September 2021, credit unions had a combined mortgage and SME loan book of circa €387 million, an increase of 19% year-on-year.

Credit unions are permitted to place their surplus funds that have not been lent to members in a range of investments including Tier 3 Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs). I am pleased to

share with the Deputy that three credit union backed funds have received approval from the Central Bank. Credit unions will be able to invest up to €900 million in these regulated funds, which will subsequently lend to AHBs.

#### SME Lending

Nineteen credit unions were approved in early 2021 for participation in the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme. Further, in November five credit unions were announced as participants in the Brexit Impact Loan Scheme (BILS). The BILS provides low-cost loans of €25,000 to €1.5m to eligible Brexit-impacted businesses.

In total, SME lending has grown 6.9% year on year to end September 2021. Further development of SME lending in a controlled manner could also assist credit unions in growing and diversifying their loan book.

#### Access to Finance for Retrofit

The Government significantly increased the funding available to support retrofit. My officials have been engaging with stakeholders to support increased credit union participation in retrofit loan schemes.

#### Other Services

Other than member savings and lending, in order to provide “additional services”, a credit union must receive approval from the Central Bank.

66 credit unions are approved to provide current accounts.

The Central Bank has prescribed a list of exempt services which may be provided without requiring approval. The Central Bank is undertaking a review of the Exempt Services Schedule to ensure that the services listed reflect the current financial services landscape. The Central Bank has commenced a public consultation seeking views from stakeholders on the proposed changes arising from this review.

*Question No. 250 answered with Question No. 244.*

### Departmental Data

251. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance the number of collective asset management vehicles and undertakings for collective investment in transferable securities that are currently authorised, registered or incorporated in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9750/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In accordance with the Irish Collective Asset-management Vehicle (‘ICAV’) Act 2015, the Central Bank of Ireland is the registration body for ICAVs. The Central Bank of Ireland is also the authorisation body for Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs) and Undertakings for Collective Investment in Transferable Securities (UCITS). ICAVs must be registered as ICAVs and authorised as AIFs or UCITS before they are fully operational.

I have been advised by the Central Bank of Ireland that, to date, there are 5,119 UCITS authorised in Ireland, 1,028 of which are established as ICAVs. There are also 3,307 AIFs authorised in Ireland, 1,573 of which are established as ICAVs.

As the registrar of ICAVs, the Central Bank has also registered 794 ICAVs. The registrar function of the Central Bank is separate to the authorisation process, and was introduced in the ICAV Act 2015. This process entails the Central Bank making a registration order which specifies the date on which the ICAV will come into operation and constitute a corporate body.

The Central Bank maintains a register of authorised UCITS, a register of authorised AIFs and a register of registered ICAVs, all of which are available on their website.

### **Revenue Commissioners**

252. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance if an online tutorial could be made available to assist persons in using the online facilities of the Revenue Commissioners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9751/22]

253. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons yet to make an online annual return for 2021; the number of telephone requests to the Revenue Commissioners on persons not having online facilities available to them to make changes to their Revenue Commissioners accounts for 2022 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9752/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 252 and 253 together.

Revenue has advised me that over 820,000 PAYE taxpayers have filed income tax returns for 2020 and approximately 480,000 have done so for 2021. It is not possible to definitively confirm the number of PAYE taxpayers who have yet to file their returns for 2021 as in many cases they pay the correct tax throughout the year and are not required to file a return, unless there are additional credits or reliefs to which they are entitled and wish to claim. Over 99% of the tax returns filed to date were received through the online channels with any refunds due paid within three to five working days.

Revenue has answered 110,000 calls to the PAYE Helpline so far in 2022. These calls related to a broad range of issues including requests for assistance with completing the income tax return (online and paper), clarifying tax entitlements for the current year (2022) and requesting changes to individual taxpayer records. Revenue has also dealt with over 3,400 requests for paper forms through its Forms and Leaflets Ordering Service to date in 2022 and processed almost 1,350 paper PAYE returns subsequently received.

Regarding Question 9751-22, Revenue has confirmed that it already provides instructional videos to assist taxpayers using Revenue's online facilities. These are available via the Revenue website and from the Revenue channel on the YouTube platform.

*Question No. 253 answered with Question No. 252.*

### **Housing Schemes**

254. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance the details of the help-to-buy scheme figures for 2021; the number of applications; the number of successful applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3049/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that there were 26,025 Help-to-Buy (HTB) applications made in 2021.

Applications for HTB may be made on a provisional basis as first time buyers will want to have certainty as to their entitlements in advance of commencing the purchase of a property. An application will only progress to the final ‘claim’ stage when the applicant decides to purchase a property that is eligible for the scheme. In 2021, 7,555 applications moved to this stage and were approved.

Revenue has recently published ‘Help To Buy (HTB) Statistics 2021’ which is available on their website:

[www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/help-to-buy-annual-report-2021](http://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/help-to-buy-annual-report-2021).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

255. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he expects the economy to make a full recovery notwithstanding the impact of Covid-19; if the manufacturing and services sectors are likely to recover simultaneously; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7049/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** By the third quarter last year, both output and employment had exceeded pre-pandemic levels, a remarkable outcome that speaks to the success of the Government’s economic policies, which protected incomes, jobs and businesses.

It is important to note however that the Covid-19 shock has had a disproportionate and negative impact on certain sectors, in particular on labor-intensive service sectors, where home-working was not possible. Nevertheless, since the re-opening of the economy in spring of last year, the service sector has seen a rapid recovery, with the overall service sector output exceeding its pre-pandemic level (January 2020) by 11½ per cent in December 2021. Of course, the recovery has not been uniform across service sub-sectors and activity remains below the pre-pandemic level in the majority of these sectors, with the exception of ICT and Wholesale and Retail Trade. Indeed the recovery in these services sub-sectors stalled somewhat towards the end of last year during the height of the Omicron wave.

On the other hand, ‘knowledge-intensive’ sectors proved more resilient. For this reason the ‘modern manufacturing sector’ which is dominated by pharmaceutical and other MNEs performed strongly throughout the Pandemic. Perhaps more importantly, production in the ‘traditional sector’ is performing solidly having grown by over 5 per cent in the final quarter of 2021 compared to the previous three months.

Looking ahead, a range of business surveys suggest a continuing strong rate of growth in both the manufacturing and services sectors, as both international and domestic demand recovers. The lifting of many of the remaining domestic restrictions in January this year is an important tailwind for the services sector. My Department will continue to closely monitor and analyse these developments and will publish updated economic forecasts as part of the Stability Programme Update in April.

### **Mortgage Interest Rates**

256. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he discussed or intends to discuss with his European Union counterparts the higher cost of mortgages

in Ireland compared with the rest of the European Union with the consequent impact on Irish citizens notwithstanding the single market. [8372/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am aware that the general level of new lending interest rates in Ireland are higher than is the case in many other European countries. However, the price lenders charge for their loans is a commercial matter for individual lenders. As Minister for Finance I cannot determine the lending policies of individual banks including the interest rates they charge for loans including mortgages, nor can other EU counterparts.

Despite this, it should also be noted that recent trends indicate that certain mortgage rates have been falling in Ireland. For example, the interest rates on new mortgages (excluding renegotiations) have fallen from 4.05% in December 2014 to 2.69% in December 2021.

The weighted average interest rate on new fixed rate mortgage agreements stood at 2.59% in December 2021, down from a series high of 4.11% in December 2014. There has also been a reduction in the interest rates charged on loans to SMEs and consumers over the same period.

However, Irish mortgage and other loans can have different characteristics from those offered in other countries. For example, many Irish banks include incentives such as cash back offers, which reduce the effective Irish mortgage interest rate. Also Irish mortgages are generally not subject to upfront fees which are typically charged by banks in some other EU jurisdictions.

There are also a number of important factors which will likely influence the interest rates charged on Irish mortgages. These include for example operational costs, certain structural factors as referenced above (such as incentives offered), as well as the fact that pricing will reflect:

- credit risk and capital requirements which in Ireland are elevated due to historical loss experience;

- the level of non-performing loans which is higher in Ireland relative to other European banks (as provisioning and capital requirements are higher for these loans to reflect their higher risk and this in turn results in higher credit and capital costs for the Irish banks); and

- higher cost-to-income ratios which has been a characteristic of the Irish banking sector in recent years.

To conclude I appreciate that greater sustainable competition in the credit market will be of benefit to consumers and other borrowers. Accordingly, the review of the retail banking market which is now underway in my Department will consider how the banking system can best support economic activity, assess competition and consumer choice in the market for banking services and consider options to further develop the mortgage market.

*Question No. 257 answered with Question No. 68.*

## **Tax Credits**

258. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he will increase the single parent carer's credit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5309/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, Budget 2022 included a significant tax package amounting to a cost of €520 million. This included a substantial income tax package comprising of an increase of €50 in each of the main tax credits – personal tax credit, employee tax credit and the earned income credit – from €1,650 to €1,700. An increase of €1,500 in the income tax standard rate band for all income earners was

also introduced. Furthermore, the 2% rate band ceiling for USC was also increased for 2022 in line with the increase in the national minimum wage to ensure that a full-time adult worker who benefits from the increase in the hourly minimum wage rate of €10.20 to €10.50 will remain outside the top rates of USC. Further details can be located at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e491-taxation-measures/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e491-taxation-measures/).

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

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

### **Tax Reliefs**

259. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Finance the financial supports or pathways to funding that are available from his Department for a single parent of a young adult with highly complex physical and intellectual disabilities (details supplied). [5493/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Department of Finance does not provide any grants for the purchase of a vehicle but instead administers the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme which provides relief from VAT and VRT (up to a certain limit) on the purchase of an adapted car for transport of a person with specific severe and permanent physical disabilities, payment of a Fuel Grant, and an exemption from Motor Tax. The limit of the remission or repayment of Value Added Tax and Vehicle Registration Tax cannot exceed €10,000, €16,000 or €22,000 and is based on the level of modification to the vehicle necessary.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

260. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance when the employment wage subsidy scheme and the Covid restrictions support scheme will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2657/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Government have stated on many occasions that there will be no cliff edge to supports for employers but we have also been clear that the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) cannot run indefinitely, nor is it sustainable to continue for a prolonged period of time given the very substantial costs to the Exchequer.

In relation to EWSS the scheme was introduced to support employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible. The EWSS is an economy-wide scheme that operates across all sectors.

In money terms, the overall support provided to-date (17 February) by EWSS is just over €7.46 billion comprising direct subsidy payments of €6.45 billion and PRSI forgone of €1.01

billion to 51,900 employers in respect of over 715,300 employees.

Since the introduction of the scheme, the EWSS has been under active consideration and review in terms of its responsiveness, cost and impact. As part of Budget 2022, the Government agreed the future of EWSS including its graduated exit strategy. Since then, consistent monitoring of the scheme continued and the scheme was subsequently enhanced in response to the public health situation, namely the extension of the enhanced rates of subsidy for a further two months (across December 2021 and January 2022) and the reopening of the scheme for certain businesses as announced on 9 and 21 December 2021 respectively.

From 1 February 2022, for most businesses, the original two-rate structure of €203 per week and €151.50 per week will apply; for March and April 2022 the flat rate subsidy of €100 per week will apply and the scheme will end on 30 April 2022.

Following a further assessment, I announced on 21 January 2022, that businesses availing of EWSS that were directly impacted by the public health regulations of last December, would continue to receive the enhanced rates of subsidy for the month of February and the graduated step-down in subsidy rates would be delayed by one month with such firms continuing to receive support under the scheme until 31 May 2022.

Turning to CRSS, the scheme was introduced as a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health regulations to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CRSS was extended to 31 January 2022 in the Finance Act 2021.

The scheme was available to companies, self-employed individuals and partnerships who carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits of which are chargeable to tax under Case 1 of Schedule D, from a business premises that is subject to restrictions, set out in the relevant legislation, that prohibit or considerably restrict customer access. The legislation requires that a claim must be made no later than eight weeks from the date on which the 'claim period' commences.

As the Deputy will be aware, from 20 December 2021, the Government introduced certain restrictive measures for businesses within the hospitality and indoor entertainment sectors. Following the announcement of these restrictions, the CRSS was reviewed with a view to expanding the supports available to businesses during the period of restrictions. Businesses operating within these sectors, who would ordinarily operate evening and night-time trading hours, were considered to be significantly restricted from operating for the purposes of the CRSS and were eligible for support under the scheme where they meet the eligibility conditions. The Government also agreed that the turnover reduction criteria will be increased from no more than 25% of 2019 turnover to no more than 40% of 2019 turnover, and that new businesses established between 13 October 2020 to 26 July 2021 would be eligible to apply for the scheme. To date a total of 25,600 unique premises have claimed payments under the scheme amounting to €727 million.

It is my intention that the legislative aspects associated with the revised arrangements for CRSS and EWSS, outlined above, will be addressed by primary legislation in the coming weeks. In the meantime, the Revenue Commissioners are operating the revised arrangements on an administrative basis pending the legislation.

Finally, work is underway at senior official level on an inter-departmental basis to review the experience from the introduction and operation of Covid-19 emergency income supports paid to/in respect of people whose employment was impacted due to public health restrictions, and to identify lessons learnt. My Department is represented on the relevant group which is

chaired by the Department of Social Protection and also includes representatives from the Departments of Public Expenditure and Reform and Enterprise Trade and Employment and from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners.

### Financial Services

261. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the main reasons for a significant number of rejections of consumer complaints by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (details supplied). [9771/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of her statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which she takes.

The FSPO has informed me that every complaint received by it is assessed and investigated in detail. Where a complaint closes in Registration and Assessment or in Legal Services, these complaints have been subject to an in-depth assessment.

Complaints that close in Registration and Assessment will be closed for a number of reasons. In 2020, 465 complaints were closed because they were found to be ineligible. This was mainly because these complaints were related to products, services, or service providers that do not fall within the remit of the FSPO, not enough information was provided by the complainant to proceed, the complaint was appropriate for another Ombudsman, or the complaint was deemed withdrawn because the complainant did not engage in any further communication.

There were 327 files closed following a detailed Early Jurisdictional Assessment service, where these complaints fell outside the remit of the FSPO due to jurisdictional issues. These included complaints that do not meet the time limits for bringing a complaint to the FSPO, where the complaint has been, or is the subject of legal proceedings, where fraud has been alleged or where the complaint is more suitably dealt with by a different forum.

Complaints will also be closed in Registration and Assessment when the FSPO engages directly with the financial service provider or pension provider, in order to secure a final response to the complaint for the consumer. This allows the complaint to close if the complainants are satisfied with their provider's final response.

Where an issue arises, which requires a more detailed legal assessment, the matter is referred to the Legal Services Unit for a formal jurisdictional assessment to determine whether the complaint, or elements of the complaint, can proceed to investigation. The FSPO makes every effort to assist the parties in understanding the extent and limits of the Ombudsman's jurisdiction. The parties to the complaint will be invited to make submissions during the assessment process, before the final determination on jurisdiction is ultimately confirmed to the parties. 536 complaints were closed following this detailed legal assessment. The total number of complaints closed during 2020 was 6,193 which occurred at various stages of the complaint management lifecycle, as detailed below.

-	Nos.
Registration and Assessment	1,401
Dispute Resolution Service	2,960
Investigation Service	735
Legal Service	536

An additional 561 complaints that were ineligible were closed in 2020. Ineligible complaints include those for providers outside Ireland, for services that are not financial services, or duplicate complaints.

### **Financial Services**

262. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman is taking the position in many cases that the consumer should have been aware of misconduct (details supplied) when they signed a loan offer or when they first went into default on a loan. [9772/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of her statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which she takes.

The FSPO has informed me that it can investigate complaints made about the conduct of financial service providers and pension providers, only if such complaints are made within the time limits prescribed by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017 ('the Act').

The Act further requires that where a question arises as to whether the Ombudsman has jurisdiction to investigate a complaint, including in relation to time limits, the question must be determined by the Ombudsman. Any jurisdictional determination, including in relation to time limits, is made by the Ombudsman on the basis of an in-depth assessment of the evidence available regarding the complaint, to ensure that the provisions of the Act are observed. The Ombudsman must at all times act within the limits of the governing legislation.

In July 2017, legislative changes were made to the time limits for making complaints to the FSPO's predecessor, the Financial Services Ombudsman's Bureau. This introduced additional time limits for complaints about the conduct of financial service providers, in respect of a "long-term financial service". These expanded time limits were included in the Act, which commenced in January 2018, when the FSPO came into existence.

Section 51 of the Act, governing time limits, prescribes that any complaint about a "long-term financial service", can be made not only within a period of six years of the date of the conduct complained of, but also within a period of three years of a certain "date of knowledge" as prescribed within the Act. In addition, the Ombudsman has a statutory discretion, regarding such complaints, to extend the time where there are reasonable grounds for requiring a longer period and it would be just and equitable in all the circumstances to do so.

Section 2 of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017 originally prescribed that a "long-term financial service" essentially constituted:

- (a) a product or service with a fixed term of 5 years and 1 month or more, or
- (b) life assurance.

The definition of long term financial service was further refined in 2018 to ensure greater protections for consumers, such that the definition now includes the following provision:-

"Notwithstanding the fact that the financial service does not fix its duration to be of a term such as is referred to in paragraph (a) of the definition of 'long-term financial service' in sub-

section (1), a financial service shall be regarded as falling within that definition if it would be reasonable for a consumer to expect its duration to be of at least the length referred to in that paragraph and that reasonable expectation arises by reason of—

(a) the manner in which the financial service operates to provide a financial benefit to the consumer,

(b) the type of assets with which its operation is connected, or

(c) representations made by the financial service provider, as distinct from where such an expectation arises in the case of

(i) a current account with a financial institution, or

(ii) any other financial service of an indefinite duration that is widely available and does not possess specialised characteristics.”

### Financial Services

263. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the Financial and Pensions Ombudsman is refusing to investigate complaints unless both parties to a joint and several accounts have signed the complaint form. [9773/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of her statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which she takes.

The FSPO has informed me that where a complaint is made to the FSPO concerning a joint account or a joint policy, the FSPO must recognise that all parties who own that account or policy have rights, entitlements and potential liabilities arising in relation to such an account or policy, and in addition certain data protection issues arise.

Whether the complaint is settled by way of agreement between the parties, using the confidential Dispute Resolution Service of the FSPO, or is the subject of a formal investigation by the FSPO, leading to a legally binding decision, the rights and obligations of all joint account holders or joint policyholders are thereby affected. All owners of the account or policy must be agreeable to the investigation of the complaint by the FSPO, and the processing of their personal data by the FSPO. Therefore, the signature of each joint owner of the policy or account is required as evidence of their consent.

The FSPO must respect the rights and entitlements of all parties to an account or policy. It cannot give preference to the position of one account or policyholder, over the other joint owner/s.

### Financial Services

264. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on the circa 1,200 tracker case complaints outstanding with the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman; the actions that have been taken to ensure that the backlog is cleared; and if he authorised the Ombudsman to employ additional internal and external resources to deal with this matter. [9774/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of her statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which she takes.

The FSPO's predecessor, the Financial Services Ombudsman Bureau, started receiving tracker mortgage rate complaints in 2009, and these complaints have continued to be received over the last twelve years.

The FSPO has informed me that at end 2021, 1,115 complaints on hand at the FSPO were identified as being Tracker Mortgage Interest Rate Related, of which 1,017 were classified as active complaints. During 2021, 257 new tracker mortgage interest rate related complaints were received by the FSPO Office, with a further 29 tracker mortgage complaints reopened during the year.

370 tracker mortgage interest rate complaints were closed during 2021. The breakdown of these closures is set out below.

-	Nos.
Early Stage Closures	34
Dispute Resolution Clarification	76
Mediation Settlement	39
Formal Investigation Resolution	181
Legal Services Resolution	18
Other	22

These complaints continue to comprise a considerable portion of the work of the FSPO and progress through both the informal Dispute Resolution process and the formal Investigation process of the FSPO. The duration required to investigate a complaint can vary depending on the complexity of the file and the number of submissions made by the parties to the complaint.

The FSPO continues to require the services of its tracker mortgage team comprising a team of solicitors, trainee solicitors, paralegals and legal executives who are working full time within the FSPO to deal with these cases. These staff provide legal advice and investigation support services for complaints received from consumers regarding tracker mortgages, which are not resolved by mediation and require a full investigation leading to the issue of a legally binding decision.

The FSPO and its Council continue to monitor the FSPO's operating environment, monitoring emerging demands for its services and identifying resource and skills needs, as they arise.

### Financial Services

265. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if additional resources required by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman to deal with consumer complaints are met by the levy on the industry generating the complaints. [9775/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of her statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which she takes.

The FSPO has informed me that in accordance with the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017 ('the Act'), the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Council approves the FSPO's annual budget of operating costs.

This annual budget is funded through two distinct sources in accordance with the Act; financial services complaints are funded by a levy on the financial services industry and pension complaints are funded by the Exchequer. The apportionment of the annual budget is based upon the complaints received in the previous three-year period in respect of pensions and financial services and therefore reflects the most recent complaints handling experience. Any increase or decrease in particular categories of complaints will be reflected in the amount of the financial services industry levy due to be paid by firms within that category.

### Financial Services

266. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if is satisfied with the resources employed by the Office of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman; and his views on the staff numbers per million of population compared to resources employed by the UK Financial Services Ombudsman. [9776/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of her statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which she takes.

In December 2018, the FSPO submitted a Workforce Plan 2019-2023 to me and I approved the recruitment of an additional 35 staff. This basis for the additional headcount was approved due to the rising number of complaints made to the FSPO and the increasing complexity of many of these complaints, which is an appropriate way to determine the resourcing requirement of the organisation.

The FSPO and its Council continue to monitor the FSPO's operating environment, monitoring emerging demands for its services and identifying resource and skills needs, as they arise. The FSPO supports the ongoing development of its workforce and places a strong emphasis on continuous professional development to support the delivery of its functions, as set out in its establishing legislation.

### Financial Services

267. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman spent a total of €1.8 million on legal fees in 2020. [9777/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of her statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which she takes.

As the FSPO is a statutory complaints handling body its functions require the ongoing provision of legal services. The FSPO has informed me that the figure of €1.8 million incurred by the FSPO on legal fees, as detailed in its Annual Financial Statements 2020, includes expenditure relating to the management of a number of Judicial Review applications to the High Court and statutory appeals by parties following the issuing of a Legally Binding Decision of the FSPO.

It also includes the ongoing provision of the FSPO's tracker mortgage team comprising a team of solicitors, trainee solicitors, paralegals and legal executives who are working full time within the FSPO, providing legal advice and investigation support services for complaints received from consumers regarding tracker mortgages, which are not resolved by mediation and require a full investigation leading to the issue of a legally binding decision. The expenditure also includes corporate legal fees.

All expenditure by the FSPO is provided for through its annual budget process, as outlined in the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017.

### **Revenue Commissioners**

268. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance when the Revenue Commissioners' public office on Cathedral Street, Dublin 1 will reopen to the public; when the public inquiry telephone numbers will be available again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9791/22]

274. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Finance when employees of the Revenue Commissioners are expected to return to providing customer services via the telephone and in person. [10028/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 268 and 274 together.

I am advised by Revenue that its public offices, excluding ports, airports and trade facilitation stations remain closed until further notice.

Throughout the pandemic, Revenue has continued to provide a full range of online services for taxpayers to manage their tax affairs, which for the most part removes any requirement to access public offices. These services, which include an online communications channel through the MyEnquiries system, are available 24/7, are easy to use and are fully secure.

For customers that are not comfortable with its online services, Revenue provides an extensive telephone service, which has continued to operate since the early stages of the pandemic. The full list of telephone services and their opening hours are available on the Revenue website. Revenue also continues to operate a full service for queries being received through the postal system.

Regarding situations where more complex tax issues exist that require direct engagement, Revenue provides a one to one appointment service with the relevant official. These engagements can be carried out remotely by video conferencing. Such an appointment can be arranged by contacting 01- 738 3660 from 09.30 to 13.30 (Monday to Friday).

Finally, Revenue has confirmed that the timelines around reopening public offices are kept under continuous review. In considering the most appropriate time to reopen offices, Revenue will focus on customer and staff safety as the highest priority.

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

269. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide clarification on a matter (details supplied) in relation to the taxation of the pandemic unemployment payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9809/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Revenue is independent in the exercise of its functions. However, I have been advised by it as follows:

Revenue's process for taxing DSP payments, including the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) seeks to cater for the different scenarios that can arise across the PAYE case base.

Following significant consideration by Revenue, the basis of taxation adopted aims, as far as possible, to collect the right amount of tax at the right time while avoiding an accumulation of liabilities at year-end in as many of the different scenarios as possible. While the option proposed has merit in some less complex cases, (like in the worked examples provided in the details supplied with the question), it could lead to significant hardship in many cases, particularly where credits were allocated other than 50/50 between jointly assessed couples.

For example, married couples who are jointly assessed may choose to alter 'the split' in the tax credits they jointly share. In such circumstances, where one or both was on the PUP, applying the process proposed could result in significant financial hardship where the allocated tax credits to one spouse or civil partner does not cover the tax due.

By way of example, a jointly assessed couple may opt to have the married personal tax credit allocated to one partner for 2021 rather than split evenly. This would result in a scenario where one has tax credits of €4,950 for the year (made up of the married personal tax credit of €3,300 and the PAYE tax credit of €1,650) while the other has the remaining PAYE tax credit of €1,650. If the person on the lower tax credits was on the maximum rate of PUP, s/he could have a potential liability of €995 after 26 weeks if those credits were allocated on a 'week 1' basis.

When a person who was in receipt of PUP payments returned to work in 2021, his or her tax credits and rate band were generally restored on a 'week 1 basis'. This was to avoid any possible financial hardship that could arise from an increased tax liability for that pay period under the 'cumulative basis'. However, a person who received the maximum rate of PUP could still have a tax liability at the end of the year because the tax due exceeded his or her available tax credits.

For a person who received less than the maximum weekly rate of PUP, his or her tax credits may have exceeded the tax due by between €3.46 and €22.86 (depending on which PUP rate applied). In such circumstances it was more beneficial to the person that his or her tax credits were restored on the 'cumulative basis' rather than the 'week 1' basis, thereby ensuring that any over-deducted tax was refunded through salary.

In some instances where a person returned to work, the final PUP payment (paid in arrears) overlapped with the first salary payment resulting in an overpayment of tax for that period because the necessary adjustments to the tax credits had not taken place. For a person on the maximum rate of PUP, the additional tax deducted minimised his or her liability at year end, while for employees on the lower rates of PUP, the additional tax deducted was refunded once their credits were restored to the 'cumulative basis'.

Revenue has assured me that taxpayers that were placed on a 'week one' basis can opt to be switched back to the 'cumulative basis' where it is advantageous for them to do so. A very sizeable proportion of PUP recipients chose this option in 2021 and where an overpayment existed, it was repaid to them through their salary.

When the Income Tax Return for 2021 is submitted after year end and there is an overpayment of tax in the year but there is an outstanding liability for other years, the refund due is firstly offset against the outstanding amounts before any remaining balance is repaid. This is the normal practice and applies to 2021 as it does for any other year.

Finally, Revenue has assured me that it is constantly seeking to ensure that its processes do not disadvantage taxpayers and that it stays as close as possible to the principle that people should pay the right tax at the right time.

### **Public Services Provision**

270. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9832/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to inform the Deputy that my Department has not won any award from Public Sector Magazine.

### **Tax Code**

271. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Finance the details of any recent EU VAT rule changes that relate to the reuse or renovation of public buildings as part of the EU New Green Deal. [9856/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, the EU Commission published a proposal on the reform of VAT rates in January 2018 which would allow Member States more flexibility in how they apply VAT rates. The compromise text agreed at ECOFIN in December last year has been amended significantly in comparison to the original proposal. As agreed at ECOFIN, the proposal amends category 10a of Annex III of the VAT Directive. The revised text will now read “Construction and renovation of public and other buildings used for activities in the public interest;”

As the compromise text agreed at ECOFIN in December has been amended significantly the EU Parliament has once again be consulted for their opinion. Once the Parliament has issued its opinion on the proposal, the Council will formally adopt the directive. It will then enter into force on the twentieth day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.

In the interim officials in my Department will be reviewing the options now available to Ireland in setting VAT rates. Future tax changes are generally taken in the context of the Budget. Deputies will be aware that my officials prepare a series of papers containing tax options for the Tax Strategy Group to be considered in the context of the budgetary process, alongside a wide range of submissions from various stakeholders and lobby groups.

### **Departmental Communications**

272. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Finance if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9959/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I would like to advise the Deputy that I do not use the WhatsApp application to conduct Government or official communications.

I can confirm that I do use the ‘disappearing messages’ setting in a limited capacity on my phone.

## Pension Provisions

273. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Finance further to correspondence from a person (details supplied), the tax recommendations he is proposing with respect to fixed-rate pensions, which in many cases have fallen in value significantly, versus the cost of living since they were awarded; if he will make a specific alteration to the tax treatment of such pensions in order that they may track and reflect the present consumer price index rate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10015/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In terms of the tax treatment of supplementary pensions, Ireland operates an Exempt, Exempt, Tax (EET) system. This is a similar system to that operated in the majority of OECD countries and means that contributions to pensions are exempted from income tax (subject to age-related percentage and income limitations), pension fund gains are exempted from income tax but income from pension drawdown is taxed.

Overall, the policy objective for tax relief on pension contributions is to encourage individuals to save for retirement, to meet a target level of supplementary pension coverage and an income replacement target, and to assist in preventing an over reliance of State support for people in later life.

In my view, we should seek to make overall progress in the area of pension provision in a manner that is comprehensive and surefooted. That broad approach is what has informed recent action in this area including the Roadmap for Pensions Reform 2018-2023 which, in turn, led to the work of the Interdepartmental Pensions Reform and Taxation Group and the separate work of the Pensions Commission. Indeed, the Commission on Taxation and Welfare has also been charged with considering the output from the Pensions Commission regarding sustainability and eligibility issues in respect of State Pension arrangements.

To answer the Deputy's specific question, the performance of private pension funds is primarily a commercial matter and contingent on market circumstances and external factors.

As regards the pension fund levy, this levy was introduced in 2011 in the wake of the financial crash and at a time when the economy was in serious difficulties. Something had to be done to preserve and boost jobs and it is an unavoidable fact that difficult economic situations require hard and very often unpopular decisions. All sectors of the economy had to contribute to the recovery plan and the levy was designed to claw back a small amount of the very generous tax reliefs that those contributing to pension arrangements had benefitted from over many years.

The levy went to fund the tax reductions and expenditure measures introduced in the Jobs Initiative, including lowering the VAT rate for the tourism sector to 9%. The levy was successful and did its job as reflected in the increased activity and employment in that sector.

The value of the funds raised by way of the levies have been used to protect and create jobs and this has helped to support the improving financial and economic position of the State. Taxpayers who may have ultimately borne the impact of the levy will have since benefitted from tax reductions in the last number of Budgets, including the substantial income tax package announced as part of Budget 2022.

*Question No. 274 answered with Question No. 268.*

## Tax Code

275. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Finance if 13.5% VAT can be reclaimed

on retrofit costs for homeowners; and if not, the reason. [10030/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of the EU VAT Directive with which Irish VAT law must comply. Under the EU VAT Directive and Irish VAT legislation the supply of building materials is liable to VAT at the standard rate, currently 23%. Member states are not permitted to apply a VAT rate lower than the standard rate to building materials. By way of special derogation from the general rule, however, Ireland is permitted to continue to apply a reduced rate, currently 13.5%, to the supply of ready-to-pour concrete and certain concrete blocks but this reduced rate cannot be reduced below 12%.

Construction services that consist of the “renovation and repairing of private dwellings, excluding materials which account for a significant part of the value of the service supplied” can benefit from the reduced rate of VAT, currently 13.5%. This means that where a building contractor carries out home improvements and the materials cost does not exceed two-thirds of the cost of the improvements then the reduced rate of 13.5% applies to the total construction service. A consequence of this is that a VAT registered building contractor will generally be entitled to recover VAT at the 23% standard rate on most building materials purchased while the contractor is only liable to charge VAT at the 13.5% reduced rate on the total supply (including the materials and the labour elements of the job) to the homeowner. The difference in rates between the 23% input VAT and the 13.5% output VAT should normally be reflected in the VAT-inclusive cost to the homeowner.

On the suggestion of a VAT compensation mechanism for homeowners, I am advised by Revenue that this is generally contrary to the operation of VAT. It is for this reason that Ireland has not introduced any new VAT refund orders since the 1980’s and any changes to VAT refunds since then have been either by EU requirement or making minor changes to existing orders.

The Deputy will be aware that Government is committed to the delivery of a National Retrofit Plan, approving a package of supports to make it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills. The measures address barriers to undertaking energy upgrades (retrofits) reported by homeowners and those working in the industry.

The changes represent an important step in delivery of the National Retrofit Plan, which identifies a range of measures aimed at driving demand for retrofit, expanding the size and capacity of the supply chain, as well as making retrofits more affordable.

### **Banking Sector**

276. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will engage with the Central Bank and the main banks now operating in this jurisdiction with a view to ensuring the availability of home mortgages on an equal basis to residents throughout the rest of the European Union with particular reference to the need to observe the single market in terms of availability and interest costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10031/22]

277. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the way the average cost of a home loan here compares with the least expensive throughout the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10032/22]

280. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied that Irish banks are adequately meeting the requirements of home borrowers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10035/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 276, 277 and 280 together.

As Minister for Finance I cannot determine the lending policies of individual banks, including where they decide to offer residential mortgages and the interest rates they charge for such loans. However, it should be noted that any bank authorised in an EU Member State is permitted to offer mortgages to Irish consumers if they wish to.

In terms of Irish banks adequately meeting the requirements of home borrowers, the Central Bank has advised that the volume of new mortgage agreements from Irish resident banks amounted to €955 million in December 2021, the same amount as December 2020. It also represents a 13 per cent increase compared with November 2021. Separately BPF1 data indicates that in overall terms, almost €10.5bn in new mortgage lending was drawn down in 2021, the highest level of annual lending since 2008. More than half of this lending was drawn down by first time buyers.

More generally, there is also an increasing range of diversity of mortgage products now available to consumers, with different mortgage lenders seeking to focus on or be more competitive in a particular part of the market. Also new entrants have recently come into the market and a number of lenders now offer very long term fixed mortgage interest rate products to consumers.

Furthermore, some lenders are offering “green” mortgages at competitive rates to customers who intend to apply for a mortgage to buy a property with a high energy efficient rating or to improve a property by bringing it up to a high energy efficient rating.

I am aware that the general level of new lending interest rates in Ireland are higher than is the case in many other European countries. However, the price lenders charge for their loans is a commercial matter for individual lenders. Despite this, it should also be noted that recent trends indicate that certain mortgage rates have been falling in Ireland. For example, the interest rates on new mortgages (excluding renegotiations) have fallen from 4.05% in December 2014 to 2.69% in December 2021.

The Central Bank has advised that caution should be used in making direct comparisons, given that cash back offers and mortgage fees are features of some markets, and will alter the overall cost of credit for a mortgage borrower relative to that reported in interest rate statistics.

Irish mortgage and other loans can have different characteristics from those offered in other countries. For example, many Irish banks include incentives such as cash back offers, which reduce the effective Irish mortgage interest rate. Also Irish mortgages are generally not subject to upfront fees which are typically charged by banks in some other EU jurisdictions.

There are also a number of important factors which will likely influence the interest rates charged on Irish mortgages. These include for example operational costs, certain structural factors as referenced above (such as incentives offered), as well as the fact that pricing will reflect:

- credit risk and capital requirements which in Ireland are elevated due to historical loss experience;
- the level of non-performing loans which is higher in Ireland relative to other European banks (as provisioning and capital requirements are higher for these loans to reflect their higher risk and this in turn results in higher credit and capital costs for the Irish banks); and
- higher cost-to-income ratios which has been a characteristic of the Irish banking sector in recent years.

In relation to the availability of mortgages, while competition issues generally are primarily a matter for the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, competitive pressures in the banking sector can clearly have an effect on the functioning of the financial system and the on the quality and price of credit and other banking services provided to customers.

The Irish retail banking system is relatively concentrated by international standards and the recent decisions by some banks to leave the Irish market will further impact on this. However, against this as noted above some new lenders have entered the market and are playing a greater role in the provision of new mortgage lending. Even in a concentrated banking system such as that in place in recent years, price competition is possible, particularly in a growing economy and trends show that interest rates in Ireland have been falling in recent years, providing benefit to consumers.

However, I fully appreciate that enhanced sustainable competition in the credit and banking market more generally will be of benefit to consumers and other borrowers. Accordingly, the review of the retail banking market which is now underway in my Department will assess various aspects of the banking market and will consider options to encourage greater competition in the credit and banking market, including possible options to develop the mortgage market.

*Question No. 277 answered with Question No. 276.*

### **Inflation Rate**

278. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which Ireland along with the rest of the European Union can formulate a plan to counter the inflationary tendencies currently in train; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10033/22]

279. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he and his colleagues in the Eurozone can combat seriously inflation affecting Ireland and other European countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10034/22]

283. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if current inflation rates across Europe and including Ireland can be combatted by way of a Europe-wide response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10038/22]

284. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if he and his colleagues across Europe are aware of the danger of current inflationary trends which could have a dramatic and negative effect on all economies; if a formula has been examined with a view to combatting the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10039/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 278, 279, 283 and 284 together.

At both the ECOFIN and Eurogroup meetings, my fellow Ministers and I work alongside the European Commission and the European Central Bank to take stock of the latest economic situation, including inflation developments throughout the EU.

The latest Eurostat estimates point to euro area annual inflation of 5.1 per cent in January. This was largely driven by energy inflation, which increased by an estimated 29 per cent. Pandemic-related effects, such as the impact of temporary VAT reductions, and technical factors, such as measurement issues, added further volatility. Core inflation – which strips out energy and non-processed food inflation – was 2.5 per cent in January.

HICP inflation moderated slightly from 5.7 per cent to 5.0 per cent in Ireland in the same period.

The latest figures point to inflation, including energy prices, remaining high over the near-term, before gradually easing later this year. The ECB projects inflation to average 3.2 per cent this year but to decline to rates of 1.8 per cent in both 2023 and 2024. Both the Commission and the ECB are confident that elevated inflation is largely linked to temporary factors, including supply-side constraints and the recovery in demand as our economies reopen.

As the Deputy is aware, the ECB is an independent institution with a mandate to maintain price stability, defined as around 2 per cent over the medium-term. The ECB currently expects inflation to fall slightly below 2 per cent by end-2022.

That said, energy prices can entail wide-ranging consequences for inflation and raise costs for businesses and families. In recognition of these potential social impacts, many Member States have introduced targeted measures to protect vulnerable households from energy poverty.

Ireland is one of these Member States. In framing Budget 2022, I was conscious of these cost of living pressures and announced a range of measures including targeted social welfare initiatives. Last week, Minister McGrath and I announced a suite of further supports to aid households and to target the main underlying problem – higher energy prices. This is in addition to the electricity credit for households announced late last year.

In addition, at an EU level, the Commission has issued a Communication on Tackling Rising Energy Prices, and the matter was discussed at various Council configurations. The Communication emphasises the broad nature of the impact and policy response.

In short, my fellow Finance Ministers and I all agree that this is an important issue and that we need to continue closely monitoring inflation and energy price developments and the potential implications for our economies.

*Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 278.*

*Question No. 280 answered with Question No. 276.*

### **House Prices**

281. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if he accepts that the going price for newly built houses becomes the base line for determining the next phase of development thereby carrying and contributing to house cost inflation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10036/22]

282. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the deterrents that might be introduced to prevent the situation by which a newly built house when placed on the market predetermines the inflated price of the next phase of any development; if he has a proposal to combat such inflation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10037/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 281 and 282 together.

My Department continues to monitor all aspects of the property market, including the rate of property price inflation, on an ongoing basis. According to the most recent figures released by the Central Statistics Office, the national Residential Property Price Index increased by 14.4 per cent in the year to December 2021. The price of new homes also increased by 5.1 per cent

between Q4 2020 and Q4 2021.

The “going price” of a house is determined by the cost of construction and the dynamics of housing demand and supply. The high levels of property price inflation seen recently are likely a reflection of an undersupply of homes in the market and the release of savings built up during public health restrictions.

The Government’s primary response to mitigating residential price inflation is to increase supply. Recent data give encouragement that the target for delivery of new homes for 2022 under Housing for All will be met and very likely exceeded. During 2021, over 30,700 new homes were commenced, the highest since 2008. In addition, planning permission was granted for the construction of 39,077 new units in the 12 months to end-September 2021.

In addition to increasing the supply of homes in general, more work needs to be done to increase the supply of social and affordable homes. In Budget 2022, €4 billion was allocated towards housing, including capital funding of €2.58 billion, a large element of which will be used to deliver 9,200 new social homes. The vast bulk of this will be delivered through new-build, with a limited, targeted acquisition programme.

Housing for All also targets the delivery of 54,000 affordable homes for purchase or rent and over 90,000 social homes by 2030, which will make a real difference in improving affordability for our citizens.

In Budget 2022, I also extended the Help to Buy scheme which is a key support for first-time buyers who wish to purchase a new home.

All of these measures testify to the need to take a multi-faceted approach to increase the supply of new housing and I will continue to work closely with my Government colleagues to ensure these targets are delivered.

*Question No. 282 answered with Question No. 281.*

*Question No. 283 answered with Question No. 278.*

*Question No. 284 answered with Question No. 278.*

### **Inflation Rate**

285. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which his Department continues to evaluate the causes of inflation in this jurisdiction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10040/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Consumer price inflation picked up sharply over the second half of last year and by December was running at a multi-decade high of 5.7 per cent. While the annual rate of inflation moderated to 5 per cent in January, this reflects seasonal patterns, including post-Christmas sales rather than an easing of inflation more generally. Almost every advanced country in the world is in the same position, with the inflation rate reaching a record high of 5.1 per cent in the euro area in January.

Both domestic and external factors can explain this uptick in inflation. On the external front, the rise in wholesale energy prices is the key contributor and reflects the rapid rebound in global demand. Global supply chain disruptions including the availability of inputs, including timber and semi-conductors, and transport bottlenecks have also added to inflationary pressures.

Domestically, the speed and strength of the economic recovery has led to a mismatch between demand and supply and put upward pressure on prices. Brexit and the reversal of the temporary VAT cut since September are likely to have been additional factors, with regulations affecting the minimum price of alcohol contributing to inflation in January.

At the time of Budget 2022, my Department forecast headline inflation of 2¼ per cent for this year. Due to energy price spikes since the Budget, there will be some upside to this projection, with inflation of around 4 per cent or more based on current energy price projections now more likely. Nevertheless, inflation is expected to ease over the course of this year as some of the temporary drivers fade, demand stabilises and supply catches up. Updated projections will be published with the Stability Programme Update in April.

However, the possibility that these price dynamics prove more persistent cannot be ruled out, with the likelihood of second round effects increasing the longer this period of high inflation lasts. The higher inflation environment has brought about an earlier than expected shift in monetary policy. In the euro area, market participants are now pricing in two interest rate increases this year; these come on top of the ending of the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme next month. The net effect of this monetary policy shift is expected to be higher sovereign borrowing costs. In light of these risks, my Department will continue to closely monitor inflation over the coming months.

### **Insurance Industry**

286. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which insurance costs in Ireland compare with such costs across Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10041/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** It is my understanding that it is difficult to obtain reliable data to compare the cost of insurance here to that in other European jurisdictions. I am informed that international organisations, such as the OECD and Eurostat, do not publish comparative data on the cost of insurance between countries. Eurostat publishes Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) data with regard to insurance, but this only provides a comparison of the rate of inflation for different types of insurance such as motor and travel insurance. Accordingly, it is not possible to compare the underlying cost of each insurance type. In addition, this does not include a comparative index for the price of insurance to businesses. In any event, any international comparisons based on price alone would not take into account relevant factors such as the various regulatory environments and liability systems in place in different jurisdictions.

However, increased availability of data in relation to insurance, and understanding the factors that influence insurance costs, is important. In this regard, the National Claims Information Database (NCID) is unique in Europe in terms of the transparency it provides into the Irish insurance sector. To date, the Central Bank has published NCID reports on private motor insurance and employers' liability, public liability and commercial property insurance. These contain a wealth of information regarding the key insurance markets for consumers and businesses, including data on claims costs and average earned premiums.

The NCID is continually looking to improve the transparency and insight that can be provided through these reports, and each data collection has been amended to include more information. As such, I believe that it will continue to serve a vital role in helping us to understand the impact of market developments on insurance costs into the future. In addition, over time the NCID should enable stakeholders to assess the impact of the wide range of Government

reforms already undertaken to improve the affordability of insurance, and will enable us to better-tailor any future measures to increase the competitiveness of this sector.

Finally, I would note that according to the latest CSO Consumer Price Index for January 2022, the price of motor insurance decreased by a further 9.3 per cent year-on-year. This is especially of note in light of the 5 per cent rise in the general price level over the corresponding period. As such, it is my hope that consistent implementation of measures under the current reform agenda will help to maintain this downward trend, while also improving the affordability of other types of insurance for businesses, community and voluntary groups.

### **Financial Services**

287. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he continues to monitor activities in financial circles post-Brexit with a view to ensuring that financial services in Ireland are not in any way disadvantaged as a result of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10042/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Over the past few years, my Department has worked closely with the Central Bank of Ireland and the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) to limit the impact of key identified risks in the Irish financial system and to ensure that the sector was adequately prepared for the possible effects of Brexit. My Department, the Central Bank and the NTMA continue to monitor developments and activities in the financial sector in accordance with their respective responsibilities.

The nature, scale and complexity of Ireland's international financial services sector is changing in a number of ways as a result of firms relocating within the single market, and the sector is broader and more diverse with more firms carrying out a greater range of regulated activities than at any time. The full impact of Brexit for Ireland's international financial services sector may not be fully evident for some years.

The Government and various state agencies, in partnership with the sector, will continue to implement 'Ireland for Finance', the strategy for the development of Ireland's international financial services sector to 2025, and are working to fully capture any opportunities for inward investment that emerge through promoting Ireland's strengths as a leading financial services centre.

At the launch of the Ireland for Finance Action Plan for 2022, Minister of State Fleming announced that the Department of Finance will be carrying out a mid-term update of the strategy to maintain the growth of the international financial services sector. The review will run alongside the implementation of the 2022 Action Plan, will inform the prioritisation of work and strategic direction in the future while building on the success achieved to date.

### **Economic Policy**

288. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which the economy of Ireland remains competitive in comparison with all other European Union countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10043/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Ireland's economic recovery has been remarkable. The most recent data for modified domestic demand – the best measure of domestic economic activity – showed continued growth, with domestic activity surpassing its pre-pan-

demic level. While the domestic economy is rapidly bouncing back, external trade has bolstered the Irish economy throughout the crisis.

The exports of the multinational sector in Ireland proved highly resilient during the pandemic, and MNCs supported the Irish economy via employment and taxes. Importantly this growth is now becoming more broadly balanced with the indigenous traded sector rebounding strongly last year. The economies of our major trading partners, including the EU, are also recovering, creating a supportive external environment for Ireland's trade going forward.

I am very conscious of the contribution Ireland's exports make to the economy, and the need to maintain our competitive advantage on the international stage. The Irish modified current account, which strips out the distorting effects of globalisation, is also in a very strong position and is expected to remain in surplus over the medium term. The 2021 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook ranked Ireland as the 6th most competitive country in the EU and the 13th most competitive country in the world.

The strong recovery in the economy has helped drive the recovery in the labour market, with 2.5 million now in employment and the Covid-19 adjusted unemployment rate falling from a peak of 31.5 per cent in April 2020 to 7.8 per cent in January 2022.

Against this positive economic backdrop we cannot become complacent and we must remain cognisant of the challenges to our competitiveness both now and into the future. As the economy approaches full employment, wage pressures are likely to emerge which could in turn feed through to persistent inflationary pressure. Indeed, shortages are already emerging in certain sectors.

The international outlook remains a source of continued uncertainty and I am acutely aware of the risks this poses. There is expected to be a negative implication for Irish trade once the UK fully implements the trade provisions of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Beyond Brexit, Ireland, as a small open economy, remains particularly exposed to global risks, including a worsening in the epidemiological situation, persistent supply side bottlenecks, energy price shocks, global inflationary pressure and rising geopolitical tension. My Department will continue to monitor the risks to Ireland's competitiveness closely, and this Government will respond to them as required to protect and promote the Irish economy.

### **Foreign Direct Investment**

289. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which Ireland remains attractive to foreign direct investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10044/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Covid-19 crisis presented an unprecedented challenge to businesses around the world, as well as to the domestic economy. Ireland's economic recovery has been remarkable, and both the domestic economy and our external environment have improved markedly since the onset of the pandemic.

Over the course of the crisis, Ireland's FDI base has shown incredible resilience. Inward FDI flows to Ireland amounted to almost a fifth of GDP in 2020, placing Ireland's inward flows as the second highest in the EU, according to the OECD. The IDA results for 2021 suggest that FDI in Ireland remains strong, with the highest increase in FDI employment in a single year recorded.

The competitiveness of the Irish economy is internationally recognised. The 2021 IMD

World Competitiveness Yearbook ranked Ireland as the 6th most competitive country in the EU and the 13th most competitive country in the world. This provides a strong foundation on which Ireland can build in coming years.

With the economic recovery progressing rapidly, FDI investment will play a crucial role in helping ensure a strong and sustainable economy going forward. Despite the disruption to the global FDI landscape caused by the pandemic, Ireland remains an attractive location for foreign direct investment. Foreign companies continue to recognise and value Ireland's unique competitive advantages, namely our track record as an innovative and stable home to global business, our talented and flexible workforce, and our hard-won reputation as a pro-enterprise jurisdiction.

### **Fiscal Policy**

290. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he and his Department can continue to influence and co-ordinate fiscal matters in such a way as to support and encourage growth and stability in the economy of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10045/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, fiscal policy operates at many levels, but the Government's over-arching budgetary policy aims to pursue a counter-cyclical strategy, in order to support both economic growth and stability. Reflecting this approach, the Government allowed public indebtedness to rise over the last two years in order to mitigate the economic fallout of the pandemic. This was the appropriate counter-cyclical strategy, with budgetary supports helping to cushion the negative economic impact of the necessary public health restrictions. In turn, the prudent management of the public finances in the years preceding the pandemic helped build the budgetary space to allow such an approach. However, as we look beyond the pandemic, we need to once again balance the books over the economic cycle and put the debt ratio on a downward path, in order to maintain the sustainability of the public finances in the future.

To this end, in last year's Summer Economic Statement, the Government set out a pathway consistent with investing in our economy and society while, at the same time, reducing the budgetary deficit over time. Our medium-term budgetary strategy is now anchored to an expenditure rule. Under this rule core expenditure growth, that is, excluding Covid-related expenditure, is fixed at just over 5 per cent per year. This is in line with the economy's estimated trend growth rate and will allow significant investment while at the same time stabilising the public finances.

As the Deputy will be aware, the public finances out-performed our expectations last year with a deficit of around 4 per cent of GNI\* recorded, around half the level we expected it would be last spring. Most of this improvement was due to better than forecast revenue receipts, and the directing of this additional revenue to deficit reduction. A continuation of this prudent approach coupled with the phased exiting of Covid-related supports, will mean that the economic recovery will help restore balance to the fiscal accounts over the short-term. In addition, the Department's medium-term economic projections envisage a return to reasonably strong economic growth in the coming years.

Nevertheless, there are a number of medium-to-long-term fiscal challenges already identifiable on the horizon. Amongst these are the challenges to the public finances posed by the so-called 'dual transitions' to a digital and green economy, as well as the expected ageing of the population over the coming decades. The window of opportunity to address these challenges

is rapidly closing. Policy intervention will be required to mitigate the inevitable implications of ageing demographics, and the dual transitions, otherwise we risk putting the public finances on an unsustainable trajectory over the medium-to-long-term. At the same time, our revenue streams will be affected by the possibility of lower corporation tax receipts.

### **Brexit Issues**

291. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent and the degree to which he and his Ministerial colleagues throughout the European Union continue to coordinate efforts in the fight against Brexit; if extra measures are being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10046/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** My colleagues across the European Union and I remain alert to the challenges and the potential economic impacts arising from Brexit. As one of the most affected Member States, I pay particular attention to the effective implementation of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and to the Withdrawal Agreement, which includes the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. Across the EU, solidarity with Ireland in respect of Brexit remains steadfast. The Member States support the Commission's approach in engaging and responding to genuine concerns from people and businesses in Northern Ireland.

It is also important that we continue to prepare for any unforeseen consequences over the coming period. The Government remains focused on protecting our economic and financial interests, and will continue to work to minimise the disruption that Brexit will have on the economy and peoples' livelihood to the greatest extent possible.

The Government has dedicated substantial resources to preparing for Brexit and the systems in place are working well. We have invested significantly in new infrastructure, systems and staff, and continue to engage intensively with stakeholders and to provide a range of financial, upskilling and advisory supports for impacted sectors and businesses.

Ireland will be the largest beneficiary from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve (BAR), the aim of which is to provide financial support to the most affected Member States, regions and sectors to deal with the adverse consequences of Brexit. Ireland is to receive €1.165 billion from the BAR, and the payment of the first tranche of €361.5 million was received in mid-December 2021. Funding will be directed at areas such as enterprise supports; supports for the agri-food and fisheries sectors, reskilling and retraining; and checks and controls at our ports and airports.

### **Insurance Coverage**

292. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if insurance companies will end the practice of not quoting customers with open claims for three years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10098/22]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As Minister for Finance, I am responsible for the development of the legal framework governing regulation of the insurance sector. Neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can direct the pricing or provision of insurance products, as this is a commercial matter which individual companies assess on a case-by-case basis. This position is reinforced by the EU Single Market framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so. Consequently, I am not in a position to direct insurance companies as to how they price their policies or what terms and

conditions they apply in those policies, nor can I direct insurance companies to provide cover to specific individuals or businesses.

It is my understanding that there is no standard approach from insurers when it comes to offering quotations on the open market. Insurers rely on their individual risk and underwriting criteria, and they review such scenarios on a case-by-case basis. It is understood from Insurance Ireland that, generally speaking, if a claim is pending/outstanding, regardless of fault, there is a reluctance from prospective insurers in the market to provide a quotation. In general terms this means that the consumer will stay with their incumbent insurer until the claim is settled.

According to Insurance Ireland, one of the reasons for this is that getting up-to-date information on the status of the open claim can be challenging, as there is no definite length of time to settle an insurance claim, especially with regard to personal injury claims. Furthermore the potential claim settlement amount could be outside the individual insurers risk acceptance criteria. Insurance Ireland has advised that there are usually specialist brokers in the market who may source capacity for consumers with open or pending claims, but the nature of the premium is often higher to reflect the risk.

Finally, it may interest the Deputy to know that Insurance Ireland operates a free Insurance Information Service for those who have queries, complaints or difficulties in relation to obtaining insurance cover. This can be accessed at: [feedback@insuranceireland.eu](mailto:feedback@insuranceireland.eu).

### **National Lottery**

293. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress of the review into the national lottery good causes awards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9196/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Funding raised by the National Lottery plays a very important role in supporting a range of good causes at national, regional and community level. In order to sustain this funding into the future I consider it important that there be robust and transparent processes for its allocation.

Accordingly in 2021, I commissioned an external review of the process for allocation of lottery funding, to examine the current system, and to identify any principles which might underpin a new process of allocation. The review will also draw on international practice and is scheduled to conclude in the second quarter of 2022.

### **Civil Service**

294. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of State agencies or organisations under the aegis of his Department that are operating under pre-1995 Civil Service salary scales. [9245/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the following table. I am advised that the Office of the National Lottery Regulator currently has no staff members that were recruited before 6th April 1995.

-	Number of staff currently employed	Number of current staff recruited before 6th April 1995
Office of Public Works	853	206
National Shared Services Office	767	91
Public Appointments Service	234	30
State Laboratory	108*	18
Office of the Ombudsman	140	28

*\* Inclusive of 5 staff members on placement*

### Departmental Funding

295. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the reason that his Department did not maintain its lead funding role for an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9425/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) has provided grant funding to Benefacts since 2015. The project was funded as a pathfinder initiative in the area of data analytics on the non-profit sector. Benefacts was initially co-funded with philanthropy, however in recent years the Department has been providing the majority of funding to the entity.

In 2019, DPER received an independent report which it commissioned to provide analysis of the market for data on the non-profit sector. This report examined, inter alia, issues around the demand for the data concerned; methodologies and technologies used; the potential for direct provision by the State of these services itself, and; the maturity of the market to provide these services efficiently. On foot of this report, DPER undertook a review in 2020 which found that the business case for its continued funding of Benefacts was no longer justified and accordingly the decision was made to terminate funding. This decision was notified to the Chairperson of the Board of Benefacts and other relevant stakeholders from June 2020.

Recognising that other public service bodies with direct policy involvement in the not-for-profit sector may have wished to consider whether they had an appreciable business case to continue funding Benefacts, my Department agreed to fund the initiative up to the end of 2021. This provision was made to facilitate relevant public service bodies to consider their position and to assess all of the options in relation to their respective business needs concerning data on the not-for-profit sector.

In April 2021, my Department reaffirmed its 2020 decision to all of the parties concerned. Furthermore, in acknowledgment of the impact of Covid19 on this deliberative process, DPER sanctioned a final three month extension of funding to Benefacts up to the 31st March 2022. As of February 2022, no department or agency has identified a significant business need to continue to avail of and provide funding to the service.

The factors influencing the original decision from 2020 have not changed materially and, consequently, the decision of this Department to terminate funding remains unaltered.

My officials are continuing to work closely with the staff and Board of Benefacts to ensure that all necessary requirements under the funding agreement will be met, including those which

may arise under a wind-up scenario.

### Voluntary Sector

296. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps that are being taken to ensure that there is financial accountability and transparency in the funding provided by Government to the non-governmental sector including all registered charities, education institutions, social enterprises and sports and professional bodies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9426/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The requirements for the management of grant funding provided from public monies is governed by Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Circular 13/2014 - *Management of and Accountability for Grants from Exchequer Funds*. This circular focuses on transparency, accountability and value for money and details the responsibilities of those issuing and receiving grants.

The financial management principles, procedures and additional reporting requirements outlined in Circular 13/2014 apply to all grant funding originating from the Exchequer. The provisions of Circular 13/2014 apply to the movement of funds from a Vote to an outside body, and to any/all onward movements of that funding. The objective is to ensure that all Exchequer funds, regardless of the method of distribution, are accounted for and properly managed.

The circular sets out details of the responsibilities of both grantor and grantee organisations. This includes, for instance, clarity on the objectives of the funding, details in respect of financial reporting and requirements in respect of audit.

### Departmental Advertising

297. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount that his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9580/22]

301. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9838/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 297 and 301 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that since 1st January 2013 my Department has made one payment to the named publication. The details and the purpose of this payment by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP), which is part of my Department, is set out in the following table.

I wish to also confirm to the Deputy that my Department (including the OGP) has not been the recipient of any awards from the named publication.

Date	Type of Feature	Purpose	Cost
May 2014	Informational advertisement	Information for the Public Sector on the National Electronic Tendering Platform (eTenders)	€1,045

### Office of Public Works

298. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of architects in the OPW, broken down by grade and pay scale, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9766/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The grade and pay-scale of all OPW architectural grades is contained in the following table.

Grade	-	Nos.
Administrative Officer	ARCHITECT - PPC	41
Higher Executive Officer	ARCHITECTURAL ASSISTANT GRADE 1	8
Higher Executive Officer	ARCHITECTURAL ASSISTANT GRADE 1 PPC	3
Executive Officer	ARCHITECTURAL ASSISTANT GRADE 2 PPC	7
Principal Officer	ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT	3
Assistant Secretary	PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT 2012	1
Assistant Principal	SENIOR ARCHITECT	3
Assistant Principal	SENIOR ARCHITECT - PPC	34
		100

Note: In addition the OPW provides opportunities for Graduate Architects and utilises contractors as required.

### Office of Public Works

299. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of engineers in the OPW, broken down by grade, pay scale and category, that is, civil, mechanical, chemical and electrical, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9767/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The grade and pay-scale of all OPW engineering grades is contained in the following table.

OPW does not employ any chemical engineers.

Grade	Payscale	Number employed at 14.02.2022
Principal Officer	ASSISTANT CHIEF ENGINEER OPW	7
Assistant Principal	ENGINEER GRADE 1 CIVIL	1
Assistant Principal	ENGINEER GRADE 1 CIVIL - PPC	16
Assistant Principal	ENGINEER GRADE 2 CIVIL - PPC	61
Administrative Officer	ENGINEER GRADE 3 CIVIL - PPC	32
Assistant Principal	ENGINEERING GRADE 1 MECH/HEATI	9
Assistant Principal	ENGINEER GRADE 2 MECH/HEATING/	4
Administrative Officer	ENGINEER GRADE 3 MECH/HEATING/	14
Administrative Officer	ENGINEERING TECHNICIAN GRADE 1	10
Administrative Officer	ENGINEERING TECHNICIAN GRADE 1 PPC	1
Executive Officer	ENGINEERING TECHNICIAN GRADE 2	6
Executive Officer	SENIOR ENGINEERING DRAUGHT-SPER	2
		163

### Ministerial Staff

300. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the civilian ministerial drivers; if they have been redeployed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9769/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware from my appearance before the Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach on 2 February last, certain Civilian Drivers have been replaced with Garda officers following a security review recommendation from the Garda Commissioner to the Minister for Justice. I have given careful consideration to the unique situation that now arises for this cadre of Civilian Drivers that have been displaced through no fault of their own given that the respective term of their contractual appointment was to be co-terminus with term of the relevant Minister, noting that many may have left jobs to take on the role of Civilian Driver. Displaced Civilian Drivers who have not been appointed by way of secondment or leave of absence from other employment, as an alternative to standard severance terms at this time, have the opportunity to consider an offer of potential redeployment as Temporary Clerical Officers in the civil service for a period co-terminus with the Minister that they were originally assigned to as a Driver. Officials in my Department are at this time working with the relevant Local HR Units in providing the Drivers concerned with the details of such arrangements.

*Question No. 301 answered with Question No. 297.*

### Departmental Communications

302. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9965/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** In response

to the Deputy's question I can confirm that WhatsApp is installed on my departmental phone. I do not use the application for official purposes nor have I activated the disappearing messages setting.

### **Public Sector Staff**

303. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the rules that are in place for carrying over annual leave respectively in the Civil Service and the wider public services; if any arrangements have been put in place to ensure that persons can carryover unused days of annual leave that have not been used due to the impact of the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9996/22]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I have responsibility for the non-pay terms and conditions of civil servants and therefore I can only comment in respect of the annual leave arrangements that apply in the Civil Service.

Circular 27/2003: Annual Leave sets out the standard rules in relation to the taking of annual leave in the Civil Service. The Civil Service currently operates a 3 year carryover rule in relation to accrued annual leave. Under this rule, any untaken statutory leave may be carried forward from Year 1 to Year 2 with the employees consent and taken within the first six months of Year 2. Any untaken leave that exceeds the statutory minimum allowance (4 working weeks) may be carried forward from Cycle Year 1 to Cycle Year 2.

Staff who are in Cycle year 2 can carry over any untaken statutory leave from Year 2 to Year 3 with the employees consent and taken within the first six months of Year . Any untaken leave that exceeds the statutory minimum allowance (4 working weeks) may be carried forward from Cycle Year 2 to Cycle Year 3.

For staff who are in Cycle year 3, carryover of annual leave at the end of the third year of the annual leave cycle is limited to the difference (if any) between the statutory minimum annual leave allowance (4 working weeks) and the officer's untaken annual leave in excess of the statutory minimum which has been accrued during the third year of the cycle only. Any untaken leave over and above this difference will be forfeited.

Due to the unprecedented circumstances of the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 and the various associated business challenges at the time, a special arrangement was put in place for officers to remain in their cycle year i.e. at March 31st 2020 (the end of the leave year) to allow additional time to avail of their annual leave during the 2020/21 annual leave year. For equity reasons, a similar 'roll back' was applied to all staff in each of the different leave calendars (as certain civil service organisations have differing leave years). The associated issuing of communications and system updates for these 'roll backs' were processed by the National Shared Services Office (NSSO).

In 2021, a second roll back was implemented for all staff to allow more time for those in cycle year 3 to use the build up of annual leave that had been created in the system and also for clear advance notice to be given that there was no intention of any further rollbacks.

The NSSO issued a communication to all staff at the beginning of July 2021 to advise staff that it was not intended that there would be any further rolling back of the leave cycle years and advising all staff to discuss with their line managers how leave was to be used over the course of the year. This communication also reinforced to all staff of the importance of taking annual leave for health and wellbeing purposes.

In recent weeks, a reminder issued to all civil servants (of the previous communication that issued in July 2021), to advise staff who are in Leave Year 3 with outstanding leave to avail of, that they should discuss with their line managers how this is to be utilised.

Further to this, in acknowledgement of the possibility that there may be staff who were not in a position to use their leave due to the business impact of the pandemic in some areas of the civil service during the past year, communications issued to all civil service employers and staff that on this occasion only, local flexibility may be provided where appropriate, outside of the NSSO system, to allow for outstanding leave of those staff in cycle year 3 to be used beyond the end of the current annual leave year, in line with business requirements.

### **Sports Funding**

304. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she or her advisers or staff and-or the Minister of State with special responsibility for sport and-or their advisers or staff provided any information on the 2022 sports capital allocations to any other Ministers and-or their advisers or staff, to other TDs and-or their staff and Senators or their staff prior to their publication on the [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) website on 11 February 2022; and if so, if she or the Minister of State will provide details of whom they provided this information to, the format in which it was provided and when it was provided. [9050/22]

305. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she or her advisers or staff and-or the Minister of State with special responsibility for sport and-or their advisers or staff ever used private communications methods such as private email or an application (details supplied) to communicate with anyone during any period over the past two years in relation to the 2022 sports capital funding awards, the prospect of individual clubs potential success in being awarded a grant or the process by which funding was being awarded. [9051/22]

306. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the date on which she or her advisers or her staff were given details of any successful sports capital applications for the 2022 round of funding; the format in which she received these details; and the person they received the details from. [9069/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 304 to 306, inclusive, together.

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 €1.1 billion. The Programme for Government commits to continuing the SCEP and to prioritising investment in disadvantaged areas.

The 2020 round of the Programme closed for applications on 1 March 2021. By this 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. The full scoring system and assessment procedures can be viewed at the following link: [www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie/](http://www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie/) and the final grant decisions were made in accordance with

the scoring system.

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. The remaining capital applications were then assessed.

Following the conclusion of the assessment process by the Sports Capital Division of my Department, a submission which included a spreadsheet setting out the final set of recommended grants was sent to Minister Martin and me on 10 February. As is the norm for grant announcements, the full set of approved grants was sent on the morning of 11 February to the Press Offices of the three Government parties in advance of the publication of all grants on the Gov.ie website later that day.

The vast majority of all communications with regard to the SCEP, or any other official business for that matter, within and from my office is done through in person briefings and meetings, official Department email accounts and electronic submissions. Private email is not used in this regard and, while communication applications are used on occasion for reasons of expediency no sensitive material is circulated using such methods.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme is important to thousands of communities throughout the country and I receive regular representations on the Programme. I am always willing to engage with interested parties on the programme given its huge benefits for so many people, communities and clubs. These queries include contacts from Ministers, Ministers of States, Oireachtas members of all parties and their staff or advisers as well as other elected representatives and applicants. Where updates are sought on an application over the course of the round of the SCEP from Oireachtas members, staff or advisers, my office endeavours to provide the factual position at that point in time.

An overall package of €150 million in new capital grants under the 2020 round of the SCEP was announced on 11 February, a record allocation under the programme. €144 million was allocated to almost 1,900 applications with €6 million kept in reserve for successful appeals lodged by unsuccessful applicants. The record allocation reflects the government’s ongoing support to sport as the sector emerges from the challenges of the past two years. It reflects the funding challenges facing clubs across the country, the unprecedented number of applications received and the vital role that sport plays in supporting community and individual wellbeing, a role that came into sharp focus during the pandemic.

*Question No. 305 answered with Question No. 304.*

*Question No. 306 answered with Question No. 304.*

## **Film Industry**

307. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount of film board funding that has been issued for development grants and production grants in 2021. [9137/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, I allocate funding to Screen Ireland, the development agency for the Irish film, television and animation industry. The allocation for 2021 to Screen Ireland was made up of €3.893m in current funding and the balance of €26.2m in capital funding.

Screen Ireland is statutorily independent and I have no say in funding decisions. The provisional figures for Screen Ireland loans provided in 2021 are set out in the table.

Category	Number	Value
Production	86	€14.36M
Development	145	€ 4.78M

### Departmental Funding

308. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason an organisation (details supplied) was not successful in obtaining funding; when the next round of the funding programme will open; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9415/22]

309. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the appeals process will be open for those that were unsuccessful on the sports capital programme announcement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9500/22]

310. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when new applications will be accepted for sports capital funding 2022. [9501/22]

311. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if an application for funding under the sports capital programme will be reviewed and the appeal process outlined for a club (details supplied) in County Westmeath. [9502/22]

312. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if an application for funding under the sports capital programme will be reviewed and the appeal process outlined for a club (details supplied) in County Westmeath. [9503/22]

313. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if an application for funding under the sports capital programme will be reviewed and the appeal process outlined for a club (details supplied) in County Westmeath; and the reason it did not receive funding. [9504/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 308 to 313, inclusive, together.

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 €1.1 billion. The Programme for Government commits to continuing the SCEP and to prioritising investment in disadvantaged areas.

The 2020 round of the Programme closed for applications on 1 March 2021. By this 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. All of the improvements which were introduced for recent rounds of the Programme to make the process as user-friendly as possible were maintained for this round. This included giving applicants a second chance to submit corrected documentation. The full scoring system and

assessment procedures can be viewed at the following link: [www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie/](http://www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie/).

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. The remaining capital applications were then assessed and 1,865 individual grant offers with a total value of over €143.8m were announced on Friday 11 February 2022.

My Department will be in touch directly with all applicants to notify them of the outcome of their applications. Where relevant, this will include details of why applications were deemed invalid. All such unsuccessful applicants will have the opportunity to appeal the Department’s decision and full details of the appeals procedure will issue to these applicants shortly.

When the appeals process is complete, a full review of the 2020 round of the SCEP will be undertaken and any recommendations contained therein will be included in the terms and conditions of the next round. The precise timing of this next round of the Programme will be announced once this review is complete.

*Question No. 309 answered with Question No. 308.*

*Question No. 310 answered with Question No. 308.*

*Question No. 311 answered with Question No. 308.*

*Question No. 312 answered with Question No. 308.*

*Question No. 313 answered with Question No. 308.*

### **Departmental Advertising**

314. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount her Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9584/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I have been advised by my Department that there was no expenditure on the magazine to which the Deputy refers. In addressing this question, my Department examined the period January 1st 2021 to date, as no timeframe was specified by the Deputy.

### **Sports Funding**

315. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the available funding for a club (details supplied) for maintenance works; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9604/22]

**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 physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. Any sports club can apply directly for funding up to a value of €150,000 for local projects. In cases where a club does not own a premises, it is still permissible to apply for capital grants up to a value of €50,000. A copy of the latest “Guide to Making an Application” which sets out the

terms and conditions of the scheme is available at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/service/d13385-sports-capital-programme/#introduction](http://www.gov.ie/en/service/d13385-sports-capital-programme/#introduction).

The most recent round of the Programme closed for applications on 1 March 2021. By this 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. The remaining capital applications were then assessed and 1,865 individual grant offers with a total value of over €143.8m were announced on Friday 11 February 2022. The priority in the medium terms is to progress all of these projects to grant drawdown stage.

In relation to any unsuccessful applicants, my Department will be in touch with relevant applicants shortly outlining the procedures which need to be followed to appeal the Department’s decision. When the appeals process is complete, a full review of the 2020 round of the SCEP will be undertaken and any recommendations contained therein will be included in the terms and conditions of the next round. The precise timing of this next round of the Programme will be announced once this review is complete.

### Commemorative Events

316. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide funding for an event (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9614/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** My role as Minister with responsibility for leading the co-ordination of the Decade of Centenaries Programme (2012-2023) is to help ensure that the challenging events of this important and formative period in our history and related themes, are meaningfully, proportionately and sensitively remembered.

I note the proposal referred to by the Deputy for a conference in Spring 2023 titled ‘*History, Memory and Legacy*’, to mark the centenary of the Irish Civil War. Throughout the Decade of Centenaries, the Government’s approach is informed by the guiding principles and the advice of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations. I have referred the proposal mentioned by the Deputy to the Expert Advisory Group for consideration.

### Sports Funding

317. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when she expects to have the Large-Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund reviewed; if she plans to issue a call for new applications under the scheme; if not, if she will be providing additional funding to previously successful recipients who may be short of funding to complete projects; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9628/22]

320. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the Large-Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund; if the fund is open to new applications; the number of successful applications; the amount disbursed; if she will provide a

list of the successful projects; and the number of applications that are currently being assessed in tabular form. [9792/22]

327. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund scheme; if it is open to new applications; the number of successful applications; the amount disbursed; if she will provide a list of those successful projects in tabular form; and the number of applications that are currently being assessed. [10103/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 317, 320 and 327 together.

The Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects, including swimming pools, with at least €100m being made available over the period to 2027.

The first allocations under the LSSIF were announced in January 2020 and, thus far, approximately €86.4m has been awarded to 33 different proposals. The total funding applied for under the scheme significantly exceeded the amount available to allocate and it was not possible to allocate grants to many worthy projects or to provide successful applicants with the full amount that they had sought. Details of all applications made and grants awarded are published in tabular form on the Government's website and can be accessed at [www.gov.ie/en/service/4113b3-large-scale-sport-infrastructure-fund-issif/](http://www.gov.ie/en/service/4113b3-large-scale-sport-infrastructure-fund-issif/).

Two grantees have commenced the implementation of their projects and to date a total of €417,015 has been paid to those applicants. The remaining projects are at various stages of assessment with many at a stage where funding agreements are being finalised.

While the priority in the short term is to advance all of the successful projects, as it is now two years since the first allocations were made, and in view of the issues faced by grantees as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was considered timely to review progress on all projects allocated grants. My Department has now met with all successful grantees and work is at an advanced stage in drafting the review. I expect this work to be finalised shortly.

Once that review is complete the scope for awarding any additional grants, adjusting the level of existing grants and the timing of any new call for proposals will be considered.

### Commemorative Events

318. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if plans have been considered to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Daniel O'Connell, which will occur in 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9633/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am aware of the forthcoming 250th anniversary of the birth of Daniel O'Connell in 2025 and my Department is open to considering how we can help to ensure that the life and legacy of Daniel O'Connell and the 250th anniversary of his birth is marked appropriately. If the Deputy is aware of any specific proposals in this regard, I would be happy to give these due consideration in the context of my Department's support for commemorative activities.

### Broadcasting Sector

319. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to make emergency funding available to the national broadcaster in order to upgrade its streaming and on-demand offering to licence fee payers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9724/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Under the provisions of the Broadcasting Act 2009, RTÉ is funded through a combination of licence fee revenues and commercial revenues, the latter being obtained largely from advertising. The Act also sets out the public service objects required to be fulfilled by RTÉ, as well as ensuring RTE's independence in the pursuance of those objects.

In recognition of the financial challenges facing the broadcaster, additional exchequer funding of €8.6m and €9.3m was provided to RTÉ for 2019 and 2020 respectively.

RTÉ had also sought additional funding in early 2020 to address the financial impact of COVID-19. However, as the financial situation for RTÉ improved in the course of the year, additional funding was not required.

Separately, in order to support a number of key strategic initiatives, RTÉ disposed of some land at its Donnybrook campus in 2017. The net proceeds of this disposal are ringfenced for specific purposes including investment in digital.

The financial position of RTÉ is reviewed on an ongoing basis by way of a governance structure which includes my Department and NewERA. My Department has not received any further requests for emergency funding from RTÉ.

The wider question of ensuring that public service broadcasting and media in Ireland is appropriately and sustainably funded, was a key element of the terms of reference of the Future of Media Commission. The Commission, Chaired by Professor Brian McCraith, completed its work in September last year, and the resultant report is being considered at present with a view to it being brought to Government shortly.

*Question No. 320 answered with Question No. 317.*

### **Public Services Provision**

321. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9841/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am advised by my Department that it has not received any award from the publication to which the Deputy refers.

### **Sports Funding**

322. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide a list of the unsuccessful and ineligible applications received from County Cork under the sports capital grant scheme. [9897/22]

**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 €1.1 billion. The Programme for Government commits to continuing the SCEP and to prioritising investment in disadvantaged areas.

The 2020 round of the Programme closed for applications on 1 March 2021. By this 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. All of the improvements which were introduced for recent rounds of the Programme to make the process as user-friendly as possible were maintained for this round. This included giving applicants a second chance to submit corrected documentation. The full scoring system and assessment procedures can be viewed at the following link: [www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie/](http://www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie/).

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. The remaining capital applications were then assessed and 1,865 individual grant offers with a total value of over €143.8m were announced on Friday 11 February 2022.

Details of all applications submitted under the 2020 round can be viewed at the following location: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/991ea-sports-capital-and-equipment-programme-2020-applications/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/991ea-sports-capital-and-equipment-programme-2020-applications/).

All valid capital applications received a grant offer and all allocations can be viewed on a county basis at the following link: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/471ed5-sports-capital-allocations/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/471ed5-sports-capital-allocations/).

In relation to the invalid applications, my Department will be in touch directly with all applicants to notify them of the outcome of their applications. Where relevant, this will include details of why applications were deemed invalid. All such unsuccessful applicants will have the opportunity to appeal the Department’s decision and full details of the appeals procedure will issue to these applicants shortly.

## Sports Facilities

323. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount provided from the large sport infrastructure grant stream for the redevelopment of a stadium (details supplied); if additional funding has been requested in the context of rising building inflation; and the measures in place to mitigate risk and or liability in instances in which a grant and funding cannot bridge the cost of a project due to inflation. [9931/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Dublin City Council’s proposal for the development of Dalymount Park was among the successful projects to be awarded funding under the Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF). A grant of €918,750 was awarded under Stream 1 of the LSSIF towards the cost of bringing the project to tender stage and a formal grant agreement has been signed by Dublin City Council and my Department.

Design work is progressing and my Department made its first payment in respect of this

grant towards the end of last year.

With regard to future construction costs, the management of these costs will be a matter for Dublin City Council in the first instance. In relation to grant assistance for future construction work on projects that have been granted design funding under Stream 1 of LSSIF, my Department is currently finalising a review of all projects in receipt of LSSIF funding. Once that review is complete the scope for awarding any additional grants, adjusting the level of existing grants and the timing of any new call for proposals will be considered.

### An Teanga Gaeilge

324. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** den Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán an ndéanfaidh oifigigh na Roinne athbhreithniú ar an tsraith taighde, Céard é an Scéal, a foilsíodh le gairid (sonraí tugtha) agus ina leagtar amach cén machnamh a dhéanfar ar mholtaí na ngrúpaí fócais; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [9951/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Tá cóip den taighde atá luaite ag an Teachta faighte agam féin agus ag mo chuid oifigigh ó Chonradh na Gaeilge.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an taighde a léiríonn go bhfuil an pobal i gcoitinne, fiú iad siúd nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge ar a dtoil acu, báúil don teanga. Dár ndóigh, is ag teacht le polasaí an Rialtais seo maidir leis an Ghaeilge, mar atá leagtha amach sa Straitéis 20-Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030, atá go leor de na conclúidí atá déanta sa taighde.

Léiríonn an Straitéis, agus an Plean Gníomhaíochta don Ghaeilge 2018-2022 atá bainteach léi, polasaí an stáit don Ghaeilge agus do na ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá úinéireacht trasrialtais ag an Straitéis agus an Plean Gníomhaíochta agus, dá réir sin, tá de chúram ar Ranna Rialtais, ar fhorais Stáit agus ar eagraíochtaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta an plean a chur i bhfeidhm.

Léiríonn an Plean Gníomhaíochta, agus an dara tuairisc bhliantúil ar a dhul chun cinn a foilsíodh i 2021, na 180 gníomh atá á bhforbairt ag thart ar 60 páirtí leasmhar chun tacú leis an teanga agus leis na ceantair Ghaeltachta.

Comhthreomhar leis an bplean sin, agus ag teacht le moltaí thaighde Chonradh na Gaeilge, chuir an Rialtas seo leithdháileadh breise arbh fhiú €14.8m san áireamh i mBuiséad 2021 d'earnálacha na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta, chun tacú leis an teanga agus na ceantair Ghaeltachta - go mór mór i gcomhthéacs chur i bhfeidhm leanúnach an phróiseas pleanála teanga agus an pholasaithe maidir le hOideachas Gaeltachta. Mar thoradh ar an leithdháileadh breise sin, bhí níos mó ná €78m san iomlán curtha ar fáil i 2021 chun tacú leis an nGaeilge trí mo Roinnse amháin - suim atá méadaithe arís go €85m don bhliain reatha agus a chuirfidh ar chumas mo Roinne dlús a chur le cur i bhfeidhm Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2021 ar mhaithe le soláthar seirbhísí Stáit do phobal labhartha na Gaeilge a fheabhsú.

### Departmental Communications

325. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she uses an application on her official Government telephone; if so, if she has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9968/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** While communication applications, such as that to which the Deputy refers is used on occasion for reasons of expediency or general communication purposes, official business in my Department is conducted through Departmental email accounts and bespoke applications such as ePQs, eSubmissions and eCabinet. I do not have the disappearing messages function activated on my official Government phone.

### Appointments to State Boards

326. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of board vacancies on State boards under the remit of her Department. [9981/22]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I can advise the Deputy that there are 20 State Boards under my Department's remit, eight of which currently have vacancies. These vacancies are outlined in the table below and I can confirm that processes are in place to fill these vacancies, some of which are close to conclusion:

#### Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

State Board	Current Vacancies
Arts Council	6 Board Member vacancies
Broadcasting Authority of Ireland	1 Board Member vacancy
Fáilte Ireland	4 Board Member vacancies
IMMA	3 Board Member vacancies
National Concert Hall	2 Board Member vacancies
National Gallery of Ireland	4 Board Member vacancies
National Museum of Ireland	3 Board Member vacancies
RTÉ	1 Board Member vacancy

*Question No. 327 answered with Question No. 317.*

### National Parks and Wildlife Service

328. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention and the attention of the National Parks and Wildlife Service has been drawn to the fact that a policy (details supplied) addresses the serious public health and safety risks posed by high density gull colonies in communities; his views on whether the conclusions and actions set out in the policy should apply in Dublin specifically across north County Dublin in Balbriggan, Skerries, and Howth given the results of the National Survey of Urban Gulls September 2021 by his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service; if not, his Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service policy on urban gulls in the interests of public health and safety; if he will provide the evidence and expert advices that he is relying on to support his position; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9039/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** As previously advised, the management and control of protected wild birds in Ireland is carried out under the Wildlife Acts 1976 through the licencing system that is available e.g. Section 42

and Section 22(9)(d) of the Wildlife Acts. In addition the State-wide Wild Bird Declaration also allows for the control of certain protected wild birds by removal of the nest or eggs of those species in a particular area of North Dublin without going through the licence application process. The results of the National Gulls Survey 2021 will inform the new iteration of the Wild Birds Declaration.

As outlined previously, my officials have engaged with a number of bodies in order to move the recommendations of the first interim report of the Consultative Committee on urban gulls forward. My Department is awaiting a response to these communications. My Department is aware of a number of policies developed in other countries to address a range of bird related issues.

### **Property Registration**

329. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of an application by persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9045/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In relation to any specific cases with the Property Registration Authority (PRA), arrangements have been put in place to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. Further information in relation to the specific case referred to may be obtained by contacting the dedicated e-mail address in respect of the PRA at [reps@prai.ie](mailto:reps@prai.ie).

### **Flood Risk Management**

330. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the powers county councils and the CEO of each have in relation to carrying out emergency works to prevent flooding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9080/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In September 2004, Government approved a national flood risk policy which assigned OPW the lead role for flood risk management and mitigation. The OPW is responsible for overseeing Ireland's approach to flood risk management across three strategic and policy areas, i.e. prevention, protection and preparedness.

The 2004 report also acknowledged that the primary concern of my Department in relation to flooding, is to ensure that when adverse conditions arise, local authorities (including the fire services) are able to respond promptly and effectively to help offset the worst effects in relation to those aspects for which they have direct responsibility.

There are three main flooding threats:

- Fluvial (river)
- Tidal
- Pluvial (rainfall)

My Department is designated as the Lead Government Department for response to flooding with the Office of Public Works (OPW) having responsibility for flood prevention and mitigation. The National Directorate for Fire & Emergency Management (NDFEM) of my Depart-

ment, working with Met Éireann and OPW, monitor weather conditions on an on-going basis. NDFEM staff co-ordinate the response to flooding at national level, when required, supporting local authorities.

Local authorities are designated as a principal response agency as well as being ‘lead agency’ for coordinating the local response to flooding emergencies as per the Government decision relating to the “Framework for Major Emergency Management” (2006). Local authorities prioritise life safety when responding to flooding emergencies. Protection of critical infrastructure, property and transport routes are also key objectives in any response to flooding.

My Department works with relevant stakeholders as appropriate, including Met Éireann, OPW, local authorities, relevant Departments and ESB to ensure a co-ordinated response to each flooding event. This response mechanism has been evidenced in recent flooding events.

Since 2009, my Department has made financial support, amounting to over €94million available to assist local authorities in meeting the un-budgeted costs of clean-up and necessary immediate works, such as staff overtime and hire of plant and contractors, associated with significant severe weather emergency events, including flooding. This is in recognition of the exceptional nature of activities carried out by local authorities in responding to these types of emergencies and the fact that the costs of these un-programmed activities cannot be met from within existing resources. This practice is considered a vital enabler of local authority response, providing the assurance that availability of resources is not a limiting factor in providing effective local response.

The arrangements for emergency management have evolved and, when called upon, are seen as having worked well, in particular the responses to flooding and other severe weather emergencies led by local authorities. All local authorities have Severe Weather/ Flood Plans in place to support the response to weather emergencies as part of their individual Major Emergency Plans. Local authorities also have a Severe Weather Assessment Team in place, monitoring Met Éireann weather warnings and OPW and EFAS flood advisory/ warnings and High Tide Advisories.

My Department’s Lead Government Department role includes the preparation of review reports into the response to flooding emergencies where national level coordination is activated. The most recent is the Review Report on Severe Weather Events 2017-2018, published in December 2019. The 2019 report was considered by the Government Task Force for Emergency Management. My Department has implemented the recommendations relating to the Local Government sector fully.

As outlined above, my Department’s role in relation to flooding has been designated as co-ordinating the response when flooding does occur, with OPW as the lead organisation for flood risk management in Ireland.

## **Property Registration**

331. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average time to update folios on the landdirect.ie website in each of the years 2019 to 2021 and to date in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9093/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** The Property Registration Authority (PRA) continued to maintain a high level of service to support a robust property market throughout the period of COVID-19 restrictions.

As set out in the PRA Customer Charter, completion times are measured in respect of cases that are in order (that is, that are not rejected or queried) and do not involve a change to map. In 2019, 87 per cent of applications were completed within 10 working days and 90 per cent within 20 working days. The 10-day and 20-day completion rates dropped to 49 per cent and 56 per cent, respectively, in 2020, and to 35 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively, in 2021, due to the impact of the pandemic and reduced staff resources. The year to date in 2022 shows 35 per cent of cases have been completed within 10 working days.

The PRA are developing a customer-centric and targeted programme to make the best use of available resources to deliver improved quality customer service. Customers are at the centre of all PRA decisions and actions, and they will continue to engage with all stakeholders on how to improve service delivery times.

The PRA is always willing to act on requests from lodging parties to expedite an application pending in the Land Registry, and every effort is made to expedite cases where valid grounds for urgency exist, such as a pending sale or financial hardship.

### **Heritage Projects**

332. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding opportunities that are available for the built heritage project in County Wicklow (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9081/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** My Department provides financial support for the protection of eligible heritage buildings, historic structures and archaeological monuments through three grant schemes which are, in the main, administered by the local authorities. These are the Historic Structures Fund (HSF) and the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and the Community Monuments Fund (CMF).

The HSF is for conservation and enhancement to heritage structures and historic buildings, in both private and public ownership, for the benefit of communities and the public. The BHIS is a scheme for the repair and conservation of structures on the local authority Record of Protected Structures (RPS). It is designed to leverage private capital for investment in small-scale conservation projects across the country and to support the employment of skilled conservation professionals. The CMF is for investment in archaeological heritage and helps owners and custodians of archaeological monuments to safeguard them into the future for the benefit of communities and the public.

On 5 November 2021, I launched the 2022 BHIS and HSF schemes which will have funding of €8m - an increase of €2 million from 2021. Full details of both schemes are available on my Department's website as well as on the websites of the local authorities; it should be noted, however, that the deadline for applications to the local authorities for the 2022 schemes has now passed. On 17 November 2021, I launched the 2022 CMF scheme with funding of €5m – an increase of almost €1m from that awarded in 2021. The deadline for applications to my Department from the local authorities for this scheme is 1 March 2022. It is intended to run all three schemes again in 2023 and full details will be available on my Department's website, and from the local authorities, from November onwards. An application in relation to the structure mentioned would be welcome.

In the context of a particular building or historic structure, such as the boundary wall to the Church of Ireland in Glendalough, the best advice is generally to contact the Architectural

Conservation Officer or Heritage Officer in the local authority who is very well placed to advise on the various types of funding available to assist with renovation. The relevant official in Wicklow County Council is Deirdre Burns, who can be contacted at (0404) 20100, dburns@wicklowcoco.ie.

## Housing Policy

333. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of PRSI contributions that are required for eligibility for social housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9105/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** To qualify for social housing support a household must meet all of the eligibility criteria, which primarily relate to income, availability of alternative accommodation, and previous rent arrears.

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended).

The 2011 Regulations prescribe the maximum net income permissible for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The Policy defines net income as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Additional Superannuation Contribution. The Policy also provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to disregard temporary, short-term or once-off income.

## Housing Schemes

334. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the position for a pensioner buying out their own home under the tenant purchase scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9114/22]

351. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason a person aged 62 years who is not working due to major disability following an accident and wishes to purchase their local authority house is being refused due to fact that they are unable to work; his views on whether this is fair; if the decision will be changed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9255/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 334 and 351 together.

The *Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme* is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme.

The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 provides that, as the Minister, I may set out a minimum income required to purchase under the scheme. The minimum income requirement has a dual purpose - it ensures the scheme is sustainable and that the tenant purchasing the house has the financial means to maintain and insure the property for the duration of the charged period.

Government has recently reduced the minimum reckonable income required under the

scheme from €15,000 to €12,500. This means older tenants, whose only income might be the contributory or non-contributory State pension, are now eligible to buy their homes if they have the financial means to do so. These changes came into effect on 1st February 2022.

Further changes to the scheme are currently being examined as part of the work on the broader social housing reform agenda.

### **Housing Schemes**

335. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the allocations that will be made to local authorities to upgrade their housing stock under the recently announced retrofitting programme; if each local authority will have to develop and implement their own scheme; if there will be a national scheme; if any such scheme will include the replacement of windows and doors for local authority homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9115/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department launched the Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme (EERP) in 2013 with the aim of funding retrofit of social homes requiring insulation and energy upgrade works. Since the programme commenced in 2013, over 75,000 units of local authority stock have been retrofitted with a total exchequer spend of over €183 million.

Up to 2020, the EERP was carried out in two Phases:

**Phase 1** of the programme provided funding targeted at the less intrusive cavity wall/attic insulation

**Phase 2** focused on fabric upgrade works to those dwellings with solid/hollow block wall construction and included the provision of heating upgrades.

The Phase 1 and Phase 2 approach to retrofitting is now withdrawn with the introduction in 2021 of a new holistic approach designed around the Programme for Government commitment that calls for the 'retrofit' of 500,000 homes to a B2/Cost Optimal Equivalent (BER) standard by 2030, of which, approximately 36,500 are expected to be local authority owned homes.

Works eligible under the revised Programme include attic/cavity wall insulation or external wall insulation where required, windows and doors replacement, heat pump installation and ancillary and associated works.

In 2021 a substantial funding commitment of some €65 million was made available for the Energy Efficiency and Retrofit Programme and the programme will see a significant increase and ramping up of retrofitting works over the next number of years, building on the good work already undertaken by local authorities to date.

In 2022, the EERP will see a significant increase in funding support to €85 million, allowing approximately 2,400 homes nationally to be upgraded to a B2 or cost optimal equivalent (BER).

My Department contacted all local authorities last month to establish what commitments they had coming into 2022 and what capacity they had for additional delivery this year. This information is currently being reviewed and it will help inform the funding allocations and targets for each local authority for 2022 which I will announce in the coming weeks.

## Housing Schemes

336. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there are schemes open to persons who are not a first-time buyer (detail supplied); if he will provide further details on such a scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9151/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Affordable Housing Act 2021, the first ever standalone affordable housing legislation, established 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 Local Authority Affordable Purchase Scheme will support purchasers of Local Authority-delivered new homes by bridging the gap between the market value of the home and the combined value of the buyer's mortgage and deposit. Regulations to set out the detailed criteria are at an advanced stage and will be issued in the coming weeks. The first homes delivered through the scheme will be located in Cork City in the coming weeks. Cork City Council indicated the prices to be €218,000 for a 2-bedroom and €243,000 for a 3-bedroom dwelling.

The First Home affordable purchase shared equity scheme, established under Part 4 of the Affordable Housing Act, will act in a similar way to the Local Authority-led scheme, but will support purchases of newly constructed homes on the private market. This scheme will be available and in every county and will incorporate regional price caps based on median house price sales. Confirmation of the final details of this scheme is ongoing in conjunction with the relevant stakeholders and it is anticipated that the First Home scheme will be available for applications from mid year.

While affordable purchase measures are primarily targeted at first-time buyers to provide for new supply and concentrate supports in areas of highest need, the Housing for All strategy also provides for the 'Fresh Start' principle. Under the Fresh Start principle both affordable purchase schemes will be available to applicants who are divorced, legally separated or where the relationship has ended and where they retain no beneficial interest in a home.

To further support affordability constrained households to purchase a home, the Local Authority Home Loan scheme commenced on 4 January 2022 and incorporates a lower interest rate, higher income eligibility thresholds, and more flexibility on house size. The Local Authority Home Loan is a Government backed mortgage scheme for those on modest or low incomes who cannot get sufficient funding from commercial banks to purchase or build a home. The loan can be used for new and second-hand properties, or for self-builds. Whilst targeted at First Time Buyers, the Local Authority Home Loan scheme also applies the Fresh Start Principle.

Importantly, affordable housing measures and schemes are designed to assist purchasers in meeting the costs of newly constructed homes and increasing the overall housing supply. By significantly increasing supply we will help temper inflationary pressures on the wider housing market which will benefit all home purchasers.

Crucially, the CSO reported that housing completions amounted to 20,433 in 2021, a welcome increase over the 2015 reported levels of 7,219. The CSO also report that Commencement

Notices for 30,724 new homes were issued in 2021, representing a 42% increase compared with 2020, or roughly the same as the combined reported totals from 2016 & 2017. While these reported figures represent a significant step forward in the Government's ambition to support the supply of new housing, it remains short of the 33,000 new dwellings annual target under Housing for All. This is why the Government has committed unprecedented levels of funding, averaging €4 billion per year to improve the situation.

Our multi-faceted approach to housing delivery will see greatly increased supply which we recognise is key to addressing inflationary pressures. Our measures will improve affordability for all families or individuals across society wishing to secure a home.

### **Housing Schemes**

337. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on extending the fresh start scheme to include persons who went through voluntary settlement processes including the Money Advice and Budgeting Service rather than availed of statutory insolvency solutions. [9164/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** A 'Fresh Start' principle applies for applications to State loan schemes such the Local Authority Home Loan.

The following categories of persons are eligible to apply for the Local Authority Home Loan under the Fresh Start principle:

- Applicant(s) that previously purchased or built a residential property, but is divorced and has left the property and divested themselves of their interest in the property are eligible.
- Applicant(s) that previously purchased a residential property, but have been divested of this through insolvency or bankruptcy proceedings, are eligible to apply. The applicant must be discharged from bankruptcy proceedings. It should be noted that a return to solvency should not be interpreted as a return to creditworthiness, which is a separate assessment.

Section 10(5) of the Affordable Housing Act requires an applicant to go through an insolvency process for eligibility as a Fresh Start applicant. It does not however include persons who went through voluntary settlement processes, including the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, but rather availed of statutory insolvency solutions.

The final decision regarding the Local Authority Home Loan application is made by the relevant Local Authority Credit Committee on a case by case basis.

Further details can be found on [localauthorityhomeloan.ie/](http://localauthorityhomeloan.ie/).

### **Wildlife Regulations**

338. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the circumstances in which it is permissible under law for trees to be pruned during the nesting season; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9174/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Section 40 of the Wildlife Act 1976 creates two prohibitions that apply between 1 March and 31 August annually.

- Subsection (1)(a) makes it an offence for a person to cut, grub, burn or otherwise destroy, during that period, any vegetation growing on any land not then cultivated.

- Subsection (1)(b) makes it an offence for a person to cut, grub, burn or otherwise destroy, during that period, any vegetation growing in any hedge or ditch.

Section 40 does not prohibit the pruning of trees that are not growing in hedges or ditches or on land that is “not then cultivated”.

Where a tree is growing in a hedge, it is an offence under section 40 to prune it during the nesting season unless one of the eight circumstances listed in section 40(2) apply.

One of these is where the cutting, lopping, or trimming of a tree is done pursuant to section 70 of the Roads Act 1993. Section 70(2)(a) provides that the owner or occupier of land shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that a tree is not a hazard or potential hazard to persons using a public road and that it does not obstruct or interfere with the safe use of a public road or the maintenance of a public road.

It should be noted that the above answer refers only to section 40 of the Wildlife Act. Other law might also be relevant in some circumstances, such as: other provisions of the Wildlife Act 1976 that relate to disturbance and injury to birds, eggs and nests; forestry law; laws applying to designated protected areas; local bye-laws, and civil law.

### Departmental Funding

339. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the breakdown of Urban Regeneration and Development Fund funding for each Dublin local authority for the past two years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9192/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) was launched in 2018 under the National Development plan 2018-2027 to support more compact and sustainable development in accordance with the objectives of the National Planning Framework.

To date there have been two calls for proposals under the URDF, the first in July 2018 and the second in January 2020. The table below gives the approved provisional URDF funding allocations for projects approved for each of the Dublin local authorities under both calls.

Applicant	Provisional Allocation Call 1 €	Provisional Allocation Call 2 €	Total Provisional Allocation €
Dublin City Council	17,837,007	174,300,554	192,137,561
Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council	21,465,098	44,361,115	65,826,213
Fingal County Council	2,500,000	25,480,125	27,980,125
South Dublin County Council	32,464,278	186,323,057	218,787,335

### Housing Schemes

340. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress of his Department's review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9199/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Housing for All – A New Housing Plan for Ireland was published in September 2021 and, as part of a broad suite of social housing reforms, committed to reviewing income eligibility for social housing.

The review, which examined inter alia the efficiency of the current banding model and income limits applicable to local authorities, was completed in Q4 2021. I am currently considering its findings and expect to decide on proposed changes and recommendations shortly.

### **Wastewater Treatment**

341. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress of the proposed sewerage scheme in Broadford, County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9200/22]

342. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider the inclusion of Carrigaholt, Cooraclare and Doolin, County Clare in the proposed pilot scheme providing funding for infrastructure in rural villages that currently are outside Irish Water's investment programmes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9201/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 341 and 342 together.

My Department is currently developing proposals to support the provision of waste water treatment requirements for villages and similar settlements that do not have access to public waste water infrastructure. I propose to make a further announcement on this aspect of the Programme in the coming weeks.

*Question No. 342 answered with Question No. 341.*

### **Housing Schemes**

343. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of applications made under the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme in each county; the number that were approved in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9202/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Housing Agency provides a central support service that assesses applications for the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan on behalf of local authorities and makes recommendations to the authorities to approve or refuse applications. Each local authority must have in place a credit committee and it is a matter for the committee to make the decision on applications for loans, in accordance with the regulations, having regard to the recommendations made by the Housing Agency.

The most recent figures provided by the Agency on the number of Rebuilding Ireland Home loan applications that it has underwritten for each local authority, from February 2018 up to the

end of January 2022 are set out in the below table:

Local Authority	Applications Underwritten	Recommended to Approve
Carlow County Council	159	66
Cavan County Council	45	24
Clare County Council	171	74
Cork City Council	466	205
Cork County Council	860	412
Donegal County Council	128	57
Dublin City Council	1184	719
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	223	124
Fingal County Council	1258	721
Galway City Council	205	118
Galway County Council	312	113
Kerry County Council	365	136
Kildare County Council	490	243
Kilkenny County Council	169	93
Laois County Council	242	117
Leitrim County Council	67	19
Limerick City & County Council	257	135
Longford County Council	137	66
Louth County Council	287	130
Mayo County Council	151	61
Meath County Council	523	338
Monaghan County Council	119	36
Offaly County Council	109	46
Roscommon County Council	115	48
Sligo County Council	139	60
South Dublin County Council	635	321
Tipperary County Council	276	123
Waterford City & County Council	282	103
Westmeath County Council	120	70
Wexford County Council	384	183
Wicklow County Council	479	199
Total	10357	5160

My Department regularly publishes information on the number and value of (i) local authority loan approvals and (ii) local authority loan drawdowns. Local authority approval means that an official letter of offer has been sent to a borrower (and therefore relates to a specific property and loan amount).

Local Authority drawdowns, approvals, average drawdowns, and average approvals to Q2 2021 is available at the following link, which will be updated, as updated figures are available:

[www.gov.ie/en/collection/42d2f-local-authority-loan-activity/#local-authority-loans-approvedpaid](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/42d2f-local-authority-loan-activity/#local-authority-loans-approvedpaid).

The Local Authority Home Loan is the successor to the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan and has been available nationwide from local authorities since 4 January 2022. Data is collected separately for the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan and the Local Authority Home Loan schemes.

## **Wastewater Treatment**

344. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of group sewerage schemes that were approved funding in each county over the past two years in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9203/22]

345. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount of funding which was allocated for the development of new group sewerage schemes in each county over the past two years; the amount which was approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9204/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 344 and 345 together.

My Department's Multi-annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021 included a measure to fund Community Waste Water Connections (previously called Public Group Sewerage Schemes), Measure 6(b). This measure aims to facilitate the continued expansion of central waste water collection systems by extension off the public (Irish Water) network where it is technically and economically viable to do so.

Allocations under this scheme were announced in October 2019 and a circular issued at the time to local authorities provided details in tabular format of all projects being funded and their allocations. The circular is available on my Department's website at the link under:

[www.gov.ie/en/circular/cf807-circular-l219-approval-of-schemesprojects-under-the-multi-annual-rural-water-programme-2019-2021-and-grant-allocations-to-local-authorities-for-2019/](http://www.gov.ie/en/circular/cf807-circular-l219-approval-of-schemesprojects-under-the-multi-annual-rural-water-programme-2019-2021-and-grant-allocations-to-local-authorities-for-2019/).

*Question No. 345 answered with Question No. 344.*

## **Water Services**

346. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a case (details supplied) will be reviewed; if advice will be provided on an issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9234/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In 2019, my Department's Multi-annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021 allocated €350,000 to the group water scheme referred to in the details supplied for water treatment improvements. I understand that the local authority have sought an increase of this funding. There has been ongoing correspondence between the local authority and my Department on the matter with further information being requested and awaited.

Under the Rural Water Programme an annual subsidy is payable by local authorities to group water schemes towards their operational and management costs of supplying water for domestic use. An essential requirement of schemes availing of the subsidy is that they carry out water conservation including actively managing water leakage.

In addition the multi-annual programme also supports projects to make schemes more efficient in their operation (e.g. water conservation and network upgrades) thus contributing to good water quality on a consistent sustainable long-term basis. In order to avail of funding under both the annual subsidy and the multi-annual programme schemes are expected to adopt the most sustainable approach to resolution of issues.

## Building Energy Rating

347. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the preparatory work that is being undertaken in his Department in order to meet the commitment in relation to action 2.14 in Housing for All which states that the Government will implement minimum BER standards where feasible for private rental properties commencing in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9247/22]

348. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he can elaborate on the use of the word feasible in relation to action 2.14 in Housing for All which states that the Government will implement minimum BER standards where feasible for private rental properties commencing in 2025; the parameters that will be set to determine feasibility as they apply to rental units; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9248/22]

349. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the anticipated timeline from the 2025 commencement for landlords to comply with minimum BER standards in rental stock in relation to action 2.14 in Housing for All which states that the Government will implement minimum BER standards where feasible for private rental properties commencing in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9249/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 347 to 349, inclusive, together.

The Government is committed under Housing for All to developing a roadmap to implement minimum Building Energy Rating (BER) standards, or 'Cost Optimal' equivalent, for the private rental sector beginning in 2025. This will increase energy efficiency, help to alleviate fuel poverty, help to protect tenant's health and improve comfort levels in rental homes. Work in this area, which will support the objectives set down in the Government's Climate Action Plan, is underway. The detailed parameters of the work including the scope, detailed approach to its implementation and associated timelines are under examination.

*Question No. 348 answered with Question No. 347.*

*Question No. 349 answered with Question No. 347.*

## Housing Schemes

350. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the new rules pertaining to the local authority home loan scheme for those seeking to access the loan that previously owned and lost a family home due to insolvency or bankruptcy; the length of time after insolvency and bankruptcy before they can apply; and if he will provide any other criteria which may apply in such cases. [9251/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Local Authority Home Loan is a Government backed mortgage scheme for those on modest or low incomes who cannot get sufficient funding from commercial banks to purchase or build a home. It has been available nationwide from local authorities since 4 January 2022 for first-time buyers and fresh start applicants. The loan can be used both for new and second-hand properties, or to self-build.

A 'Fresh Start' principle applies for applications to State loan schemes such the Local Authority Home Loan. The following categories of persons are eligible to apply for the Local

Authority Home Loan under the Fresh Start principle:

- Applicant(s) that previously purchased or built a residential property, but is divorced and has left the property and divested themselves of their interest in the property are eligible.

- Applicant(s) that previously purchased a residential property, but have been divested of this through insolvency or bankruptcy proceedings, are eligible to apply. The applicant must be discharged from bankruptcy proceedings. It should be noted that a return to solvency should not be interpreted as a return to creditworthiness, which is a separate assessment.

In recognition of such instances, an exemption to the First Time Buyer eligibility criteria can be applied under the Fresh Start Principle. Therefore, once a person has exited insolvency/ bankruptcy proceedings and if as a result of insolvency or bankruptcy they had to sell or had been divested of their home, they are eligible to apply for a Local Authority Home Loan. However, credit worthiness and repayment capacity must also be assessed as part of the underwriting process.

The final decision regarding the Local Authority Home Loan application is made by the relevant Local Authority Credit Committee on a case by case basis.

Further details can be found on [localauthorityhomeloan.ie/](http://localauthorityhomeloan.ie/).

*Question No. 351 answered with Question No. 334.*

## **Housing Schemes**

352. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on Project Tosaigh; and if the closing of the judicial review window of challenge is still expected by 31 March 2022. [9269/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Project Tosaigh aims to bring 5,000 privately developed units of affordable housing on stream over the first half of Housing for All. This is in addition to the State lands the Land Development Agency (LDA) is already working on.

The initial focus of the initiative is on projects which have been granted planning permission or for which a grant of planning is anticipated in the short term and where delivery of homes could be accelerated by entering into forward purchase transactions with the LDA. At launch, the initial expression of interest process targeted planning consented or near planning consented schemes, schemes whereby planning was anticipated to be granted by 31 March 2022 or the closing of the Judicial Review window of challenge was expected by 31 March 2022. See [lda.ie/home-building-partnership/](http://lda.ie/home-building-partnership/) for more.

The LDA has advised that a very encouraging level of response was achieved to the November invitation for expressions of interest and engagement meetings in respect of schemes with the potential to deliver units (to practical completion) in 2022 and 2023 have been prioritised. Engagement with developers on potential schemes is ongoing and when schemes are provisionally approved for inclusion in the initiative, technical and other due diligence will follow as part of the process.

## **Water Services**

353. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the proposed scheme between local authorities and Irish Water to provide drinking water fountains nationwide to reduce plastic bottle litter as outlined in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9340/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Programme for Government includes a commitment to develop a scheme between local authorities and Irish Water to provide drinking water fountains nationwide to reduce plastic bottle litter.

In addition, EU Directive 2020/2184 (the Drinking Water Recast Directive) as adopted on 16 December 2020 updates the obligations on Member States in relation to the quality of water intended for human consumption. The objective of this Directive is to protect human health from the adverse effects of any contamination of water intended for human consumption by ensuring that it is wholesome and clean, and to improve access to water intended for human consumption.

In order to promote the use of tap water intended for human consumption, article 16 of the Directive requires that Member States shall ensure that outdoor and indoor equipment is set up in public spaces, where technically feasible, in a manner that is proportionate to the need for such measures and taking into account specific local conditions, such as climate and geography. Member States must transpose article 16 of the Directive by 12 January 2023.

To assist with the transposition of the Directive, and the implementation of the commitment in the Programme for Government, I have convened a Drinking Water Expert Group to provide advice on the appropriate preparations and steps necessary for the successful implementation of the Directive, including article 16, as described above.

I have made provision in my Department's budget for 2022 to develop a Pilot Scheme on the provision of drinking water fountains in cooperation with local authorities and Irish Water. This Pilot Scheme will provide a basis for further drinking water fountains to be rolled out in coming years.

## **Rental Sector**

354. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is a mechanism to expedite a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9394/22]

**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.

Due to the quasi-judicial nature of the RTB, it would be inappropriate for me, as Minister, or my Department to provide legal advice, comment on, or to intervene in the specifics of any individual case. There is a process through which all dispute cases raised must go, however a landlord or tenant can contact the RTB directly to enquire about a case they have raised at [disputes@rtb.ie](mailto:disputes@rtb.ie)

## **Planning Issues**

355. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has ever issued a circular in relation to section 50B of the Planning and Development Act 2000. [9398/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** My Department issued Circular Letter PL 09-2018 on 9 November 2018 advising planning authorities of the commencement of various provisions contained in the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018 further to the signing of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018 (Commencement) Order 2018 (S.I. No. 436/2018).

Amongst the provisions commenced was an amendment to Section 50B of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which extended the section 50B special legal cost rules to judicial reviews of decisions, actions or omissions made under national law implementing the Appropriate Assessment provisions of the Habitats Directive. This supplemented the pre-existing section 50B provisions applying the special legal cost rules to judicial reviews of decisions, actions or omissions made under national law implementing the EU Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive (the SEA Directive) and those elements of the EU Environmental Impact Assessment Directive (the EIA Directive) and the EU Integrated Pollution Protection and Control Directive (the IPPC Directive) providing for the challenging of decisions, acts or omissions subject to public participation.

## **Planning Issues**

356. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current regulations in relation to planning permission to install solar panels on the roof of a school. [9409/22]

**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. Section 4 of the Act 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. 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. Included in the planning exemptions set out in the Regulations are those applying to the installation of solar infrastructure on a variety of building types, including houses, businesses, industrial and agricultural, to which specific conditions are attached. There is currently no planning exemption set out in the Regulations for the installation of solar panels on the roof of a school.

My Department, in the context of the Climate Action Plan and in consultation with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, has undertaken a review of the solar panel planning exemptions set out in the Regulations, with a particular focus on facilitating increased self-generation of electricity. This review is now complete. Substantial changes to the current planning exemption thresholds for solar panels are proposed, as well as the introduction of new classes of solar panel planning exemptions for apartments and educational/community/religious buildings.

In light of the need to appropriately address aviation safety concerns arising from the “glint and glare” impacts of solar panels and the easing of the solar panel planning exemption thresh-

olds, the regulations will cover the vast majority of the land area of the country with limited restriction zones around airports.

The draft regulations have been reviewed under the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive 2001/42/EC and it has been determined that they are likely to have significant effects on the environment, necessitating the undertaking of a full SEA on the draft proposals. It is anticipated that the formal SEA process will commence, with consultation with the statutory environmental authorities to inform the content of the Environmental Report, following the completion of the screening for Appropriate Assessment by my Department's Ecological Assessment Unit. The SEA Environmental Report will be published alongside the draft regulations for a period of public consultation of not less than 4 weeks. This public consultation is expected to commence shortly. A copy of the draft regulations and the Environmental Report will be made available for inspection over this period. Written submissions or observations will be taken into consideration before the finalisation of the draft regulations.

As required under planning legislation, the proposed exempted development regulations must be laid in draft form before the Houses of the Oireachtas and receive a positive resolution from both Houses before they can be made and the SEA process concluded. It is intended that the process for finalising the solar panel planning exemptions will be completed in the coming months.

While these regulations are being advanced, my Department is concurrently examining the scope to draft supplementary regulations to further expand the exemptions by way of reducing the proposed restriction zones around airports.

### **Commercial Rates**

357. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to extend the rates waiver to dry cleaners that are struggling financially as a result of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9430/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** €729m was recouped to local authorities to fund the cost of a 9 month rates waiver in 2020. A further €424m was recouped in respect of the 2021 Q1-Q3 rates waiver. These were unprecedented measures, which offered support to businesses and financial certainty to local authorities.

The Government, in Budget 2022, announced a more targeted commercial rates waiver than had previously applied. For quarter 4 of 2021 and quarter 1 of 2022, a limited waiver scheme, applying primarily to hospitality, leisure and entertainment, has been put in place, supported by an allocation of €62.3m per quarter from Government.

Government has the challenge of balancing competing demands for finite resources. The Q4 2021 and Q1 2022 targeted rates waivers are separate, stand-alone schemes and in recognition of the resources available and the unwinding of public health restrictions, many businesses that benefited from previous waivers are no longer eligible. There are no current plans to revisit or extend the scope of the waiver.

### **Citizens' Assembly**

358. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on the youth biodiversity assembly organised through various networks of Comhairlí na nÓg; if the outcome of the youth biodiversity assembly will lead into the wider Citizen's Assembly on Biodiversity which is due to take place in March 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9499/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** The Government recently agreed to the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity, the inaugural meetings of which are planned for April 2022.

The terms of reference for the Citizens' Assembly on biodiversity derive from, and are consistent with, the resolution passed by Dáil Éireann in May 2019 which declared a climate and biodiversity emergency and called for a citizens' assembly to examine how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss.

Concurrently, work is underway in my Department on establishing a young peoples' assembly on biodiversity. I consider it crucial that the views of our young people are properly and carefully considered in determining how we approach the biodiversity crisis in the coming years.

In this context, I am examining ways to best facilitate a mutually constructive dialogue between the Citizens' Assembly and the young peoples' assembly, details of which will be announced in the coming weeks.

### House Sales

359. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total value of investment in property in Cork by foreign direct investment in 2020 and 2021. [9565/22]

360. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of units purchased by institutional investment funds and foreign direct investment in Cork in each of the years 2016 to 2021, in tabular form. [9567/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 359 and 360 together.

My Department does not collect data in relation to the ownership or construction of individual housing units purchased and sold in the housing market.

The Government is cognisant of the potential impact of institutional investment on the housing market but recognises there is an important role for such investors in financing the much needed increase in supply of housing in the coming years. Increasing supply is at the heart of *Housing for All* and without appropriate institutional investment, activity in the housing market would be much reduced and the significant pressure already facing renters and prospective home-owners would increase further.

That said, the Government took action last year to ensure institutional investors do not inappropriately purchase homes better suited for individual buyers. It did so through a significant stamp duty increase, which has now been fully legislated for, and planning permission changes. This combination of measures is a balanced approach, which supports home ownership in lower density type developments, while maintaining and supporting finance for additional supply in high density projects where viability is an issue.

### **Departmental Advertising**

361. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9578/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** As clarified by the Deputy, during the period 2013 to present, my Department has not placed any advertising in this magazine.

### **Cross-Border Co-operation**

362. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress that has been made in respect of the future funding and Government commitments to co-develop the Narrow Water Bridge; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9587/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** The Narrow Water Bridge is a cross-border project led by Louth County Council and supported by the Shared Island Fund, which as the Deputy will know is designed to fund strategic north-south projects that implement the commitments and objectives on Shared Island set out in the Programme for Government. The bridge will connect Cornamucklagh near Omeath, Co Louth with Narrow Water near Warrenpoint, Co Down.

Following a Government decision in June 2021, An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin announced the approval of an initial €3m in funding from the Shared Island Fund to take the project forward to tender stage. Work is underway in this regard, led by Louth County Council and overseen by my Department in this jurisdiction, and the Department of Infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The Government is committed in its support for this important project, with funding for future years to be determined once firm costings are available and the tender development process has been completed.

### **Housing Schemes**

363. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the grants that are available for renovating houses in towns or in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9609/22]

382. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the grants that are available from his Department to maintain and repair a rural domestic dwelling which has fallen into disrepair; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9988/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 363 and 382 together.

Housing for All (published in September 2021) provides a new housing plan for Ireland to 2030 with the overall objective that every citizen in the State should have access to good quality homes through a steady supply of housing in the right locations, with economic, social and

environmental sustainability built into the system. The strategy sets out, over four pathways, a broad suite of measures to achieve its policy objectives together with a financial commitment of in excess of €4 billion per annum.

The suite of measures under the pathway to addressing vacancy and efficient use of existing stock includes the Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund which will be delivered by local authorities for the provision of serviced sites for housing, to attract people to build their own homes and to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, enabling people to live in small towns and villages, in a sustainable way.

The approach to the Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund, which includes a proposal for a refurbishment grant for vacant properties in towns and villages other than rural areas, is currently under consideration and it is expected that a call for proposals will issue to local authorities later this quarter.

### **Heritage Schemes**

364. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a heritage grant is available for renovating ruins next to a house or on the home property; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9610/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** My Department provides financial support for eligible conservation works towards heritage buildings, historic structures and archaeological monuments through three grant schemes which are, in the main, administered by the local authorities. These are the Historic Structures Fund (HSF) and the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and the Community Monuments Fund (CMF).

The HSF is for conservation and enhancement to heritage structures and historic buildings, in both private and public ownership, for the benefit of communities and the public. Included in the HSF is a stream for vernacular structures, under which conservation works to ‘informal’ traditional buildings may be funded. The BHIS is a scheme for the repair and conservation of structures on the local authority Record of Protected Structures (RPS). It is designed to leverage private capital for investment in small-scale conservation projects across the country and to support the employment of skilled conservation professionals. The CMF is for investment in archaeological heritage and helps owners and custodians of archaeological monuments to safeguard them into the future for the benefit of communities and the public.

On 5 November 2021 I launched the 2022 BHIS and HSF schemes which will have funding of €8m - an increase of €2 million from 2021. Full details of both schemes are available on my Department’s website as well as on the websites of the local authorities; it should be noted, however, that the deadline for applications to the local authorities for the 2022 schemes has now passed. On 17 November 2021 I launched the 2022 CMF scheme with funding of €5m – an increase of almost €1m from that awarded in 2021. The deadline for applications to my Department from the local authorities for this scheme is 1 March 2022.

It is intended to run all three schemes again in 2023 and full details will be available on my Department’s website, and from the local authorities, from November onwards. You may wish to ascertain the eligibility of the structure you have in mind in the meantime. In the context of a particular building or historic structure, the best advice is generally to contact the Architectural Conservation Officer or Heritage Officer in the local authority who is very well placed to advise on the various types of funding available.

## Departmental Schemes

365. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the up-to-date position regarding the drawdown of funding from his Department granted under The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund in respect of Killarney County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9624/22]

366. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the up-to-date position regarding the drawdown of funding from his Department granted under The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund in respect of Tralee, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9625/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 365 and 366 together.

In 2018, a total of €3,719,011 was allocated to Kerry County Council under Call 1 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) in respect of the projects submitted for Tralee and Killarney. To date, Kerry County Council have drawn down a total of €2,136,735 in respect of these projects.

In 2021, I announced provisional funding support of €32,005,146 for Kerry County Council's successful Call 2 projects – Destination Killarney (€16,068,429) and Positioning Tralee as a Regional Economic Driver & Destination Town (€15,936,717). These projects are at an early stage of development and therefore there has been no drawdown in respect of either project to date.

While my Department works closely and communicates regularly with Kerry County Council in respect of project funding, responsibility for the advancement of these URDF supported projects through the various stages of planning, development and completion is, in the first instance, a matter for the Sponsoring Agency, Kerry County Council.

In this regard it should be noted that all URDF supported projects must be carefully developed and managed by the Sponsoring Agency in accordance with the normal conditions and arrangements that apply to public sector managed projects including, exercising appropriate cost control and delivering projects as approved, and in full compliance with the Public Spending Code.

*Question No. 366 answered with Question No. 365.*

## Local Authorities

367. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of new staff provided to each local authority to deliver affordable housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9716/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authority for which he or she is responsible. In this regard, the assignment of local authority staff to a particular function, such as the delivery of affordable housing, is a matter for the Chief Executive.

However, as part of the measures to support institutional capacity, Housing for All com-

mits to strengthen the capacity of local authorities to initiate, design, plan, develop and manage housing projects and recognises that this requires the resourcing of the housing services of local authorities. Last year, my Department worked closely with local authorities, through the CCMA and the Housing Delivery Coordination Office, to identify capacity constraints and additional staffing resources required to deliver the social housing targets set out in Housing for All. Following this analysis, I approved over 200 new posts for local authorities.

My Department, with the Housing Delivery Co-ordination Office, is now undertaking a review of affordable housing staff resources similar to the recent review of social housing delivery of local authority capacity.

Key considerations in this review include the number of local authorities with identified affordability constraints, the type of structure (administrative/professional staff) necessary to deliver affordable housing and the degree of overlap/synergy there might be with the additional support being provided for social housing delivery.

The review of affordable housing staffing needs is dependent on finalisation of Housing Delivery Actions Plans which are currently being prepared by local authorities.

### Vacant Properties

368. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of actions from the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy that have been fully completed; the number that have been partially completed; the number of actions that are outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9718/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the following table.

Action No.	TABLE OF VACANCY ACTIONS	TIMELINE	UPDATES @ SEPTEMBER 2021
			1: ESTABLISH ROBUST, ACCURATE, CONSISTENT AND UP-TO-DATE DATA SETS ON VACANCY
1A	Establishment of a Vacant Homes Unit within the Department and appointment of Vacant Homes Officers in local authorities to drive and coordinate actions at a national and local level, including data collection and analysis.	Complete	VHU Established August 2017. Continued funding to support Vacant Homes Officers in LAs 2021/2022 - €50,000 p.a. Under Housing For All the Government has committed to ensuring that these are full-time posts increasing funding to support Vacant Homes Officers 2022/2023 - €60,000 p.a.
1B	Establish a vacancy sub-group (under the Department’s Housing Data Analytics Group), including representatives of the Department, CSO, local government sector and the Housing Agency and task the Vacancy sub-group with developing a standardised methodology of data collection that is accurate and consistent for utilisation across the local government sector.	Commenced	Vacancy Sub-Group established.

Action No.	TABLE OF VACANCY ACTIONS	TIMELINE	UPDATES @ SEPTEMBER 2021
1C	Conduct a Pilot Survey to ensure methodology development is robust and produces reliable output and consider whether to roll out as a national survey.	Completed March 2019	Pilot Survey concluded. Full roll out at national level is being considered, in the context of the wider data gathering as part of Housing for All.
			2: BRING FORWARD MEASURES TO ENSURE, TO THE GREATEST DEGREE POSSIBLE, THAT VACANT AND UNDE-RUSED PRIVATELY OWNED PROPER-TIES ARE BROUGHT BACK TO USE
2A	Gain a better understanding as to the barriers that exist to the reuse of privately owned vacant properties.	Ongoing	Mail shot issued to Licenced Property Service Providers to identify & assist with vacant properties, especially access to apartments. Specific consideration given to vacancy as part of the development of Housing for All, and a specific pathway included to address vacancy in the housing stock.
2B	Continuously review and evaluate existing schemes to ensure they are effective in bringing homes back to viable use.	Ongoing	273 homes delivered back into use under Repair & Lease (End Q3 2021). Since the Buy and Renew Scheme was introduced, local authorities have used it to acquire and renew approximately 700 homes for social housing use.
2C	Address vacancy in commercial/over the shop properties – reducing where possible regulatory barriers and providing guidance to bring clarity on what regulatory requirements apply to such properties.	Ongoing	Bringing Back Homes - Manual for the reuse of existing buildings was published in December 2018. The appointment of Vacant Homes Officer to act as a central point of contact in each LA was also to address this action point.
2D	Examine the potential for the greater use of legislative powers available to local authorities to reactivate vacant dwellings.	Ongoing	The planning regulations, introduced by SI 30 of 2018, which exempted certain vacant commercial premises from requiring planning permission to change to residential have been extended until 2025. The extension of the 2018 legislation provides an immediate and seamless continuance of the previous exemption regulations. In addition, the scope of the exemption was also extended to include an extra class of use, that of public houses. While a number of authorities have been successful in using their CPO powers, Housing for All launches a new nationwide programme with specific targets for activation of vacant homes through the use of CPO.
			3: BRING FORWARD MEASURES TO MINIMISE VACANCY ARISING IN SOCIAL HOUSING STOCK

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Action No.	TABLE OF VACANCY ACTIONS	TIMELINE	UPDATES @ SEPTEMBER 2021
3A	Review funding mechanisms on an on-going basis with appropriate adjustments made to ensure that the sector has the capacity to prioritise bringing vacant properties back into use.	Ongoing	Funding of €2.99m made available to Vacant Homes Unit for 2022 to support the work of the unit as well as the Vacant Homes Offices in local authorities including the funding of posts of Vacant Homes Officers. The Vacant Homes Unit ran an advertising campaign in October 2020. The VHU also placed advertisements overseas newspapers and ran an online social media advertising campaign in March 2020 to publicise vacant homes initiatives. Housing for All now contains a number of measures to expand existing schemes to tackle vacancy, including using the Better Energy Homes Grant to support retrofit for vacancy properties and the establishment of a new Fund, Croí Cónaithe to support bringing properties back into use in towns and villages, where the vacancy/dereliction is high.
3B	Continue working with local authorities to introduce preventative maintenance approach of housing stock.	Ongoing	These measures are ongoing and specific commitments in this regard are set out in Housing for All (Section 4.2 and Action 20.6).
3C	Continue to liaise with local authorities with a view to ensuring that Choice Based Letting is implemented as widely as possible across the country.	Ongoing	Choice Based Letting (CBL) is a method whereby available social housing stock is let by being openly advertised by Local Authorities to persons on the social housing waiting list. This allows qualified applicants to 'register an interest' in available homes. While many housing authorities have adopted CBL, it is not yet in operation in all Local Authorities. The DHLGH is working with the Local Authority sector, through the Local Government Management Association (LGMA) and the County and City Managers Association (CCMA) to progress this and funding has been made available in 2022 to encourage Local Authorities to adopt this method of letting. The Department will continue to work with Local Authorities who do not yet have CBL to progress the standardisation of the CBL systems in place across Local Authorities.
3D	Engage with the Housing Agency and the Approved Housing Body (AHB) sector to identify, support and enter agreements with AHBs best suited to playing a significant role in bringing vacant properties back into use.	Ongoing	The Housing Agency is engaging with local authorities in bringing vacant properties back into use.
			4: CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT WITH, AND PROVISION OF SUPPORT TO, KEY STAKEHOLDERS, TO ENSURE SUITABLE VACANT PROPERTIES HELD BY BANKS, FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND INVESTORS ARE ACQUIRED FOR SOCIAL HOUSING USE

Action No.	TABLE OF VACANCY ACTIONS	TIMELINE	UPDATES @ SEPTEMBER 2021
4A	Ensure adequate capital funding is in place for Housing Agency to purchase and acquire vacant properties. Housing Agency to continue to engage with banks, financial institutions and investment companies to purchase suitable units, selling ultimately to AHBs to tenant.	Annually	
4B	Ensure suitable portfolios of vacant properties are acquired from financial institutions and investors.	Ongoing	
4C	Continued engagement of Housing Agency with NAMA and other relevant stakeholders to deliver homes to the social housing sector.	Ongoing	Through the revolving acquisitions fund of €70 million managed by the Housing Agency since January 2017 to end of Q2 2021, a total of 839 properties have been made available to Approved Housing Bodies and a further 51 properties are in the process of being secured. The Housing Agency has also supported local authorities to acquire a further 550 vacant properties from financial institution for social housing purposes with a further 103 proceeding through to sale. Under Housing for All, the operations of this Fund will be reviewed.
4D	Department to engage further with local authorities and stakeholders, in respect of unfinished housing estates, to explore the range of strategic acquisition options available to local authorities to take up remaining, suitable and required vacant units.	Ongoing	Local Authorities are responsible for the management and administration of unfinished housing developments. The latest data from a 2020 survey shows that 123 developments remain on the 'unfinished' list. Within the remaining cohort of 123 developments, 58 developments are unoccupied. These developments mainly contain partial shells and units at foundation level, are securely fenced off and are located in low demand areas. The remaining 65 developments containing residents will be the focus for Local Authorities to work towards a satisfactory resolution. In total, at the time of survey, there were 326 houses vacant and 13 apartments. Housing for All reflects the commitment for Local Authorities to work with appropriate stakeholders towards minimising that vacancy level.
			5: FOSTER AND DEVELOP CROSS-SECTOR RELATIONSHIPS, COLLABORATING IN PARTNERSHIP TO TACKLE VACANT HOUSING MATTERS

Action No.	TABLE OF VACANCY ACTIONS	TIMELINE	UPDATES @ SEPTEMBER 2021
5A	Draw from the overall National Planning Framework Strategy, having particular regard to its objectives addressing vacancy.	Ongoing	Work has been advancing on the implementation of the National Planning Framework - National Policy Objective 16, National Policy Objective 25 and National Policy Objective 35. The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) have been game-changers in providing substantial resourcing to support more development, through the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's five cities, large towns and villages. Housing for All, commits to the incorporation of activation of vacant properties in the key criteria for future funding from both funds. In addition, the pathway on addressing vacancy and the efficient use of housing stock, has many actions, in line with the NPF objectives, and the Town Centre First policy (launched on 4 February 2022) to address vacancy.
5B	Development, rollout and monitoring of dedicated Urban Regeneration Scheme.	Ongoing	The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) is a flagship element of Project Ireland 2040. Under the stewardship of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government the Fund was established in 2018 to support more compact and sustainable development, through the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's five cities and other large towns, in line with the objectives of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan (NDP). Under the NDP 2021-2030 the URDF has been extended to 2030 with a total allocation in excess of €2 billion, including €159 million available to fund URDF-supported projects in 2022. To date there have been two calls for proposals under the URDF, the first in July 2018 and the second in January 2020. So far almost €312m has been allocated in respect of the 87 projects approved under Call 1, while in March 2021 funding support of €1.3 billion was announced in respect of a further 45 proposals approved under Call 2. Almost €100m has been recouped by the URDF to successful applicants since 2019. The important role of the URDF is outlined in Housing for All, particularly, in relation to the tackling vacancy, and encouraging residential development in brownfield areas of towns and cities. It is intended that there will be a third call for proposals for the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) in the second half of 2022. This will include a particular emphasis on proposals that focus on implementation of the Town Centre First Policy that include measures to tackle vacancy and dereliction through greater occupancy for residential purposes.

Action No.	TABLE OF VACANCY ACTIONS	TIMELINE	UPDATES @ SEPTEMBER 2021
5C	Consider utilisation of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund as a mechanism for addressing vacancy in urban areas and support the submission of proposals to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund with a view to reducing the level of vacancy in rural areas.	Commenced	The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund is administered by the Department of Rural and Community Development and seeks to support ambitious and strategic projects which have the potential to transform rural economies and communities. The fund focuses on all settlements and rural areas with fewer than 10,000 people which are located outside the five city metropolitan areas. The Government has committed €1 billion over 10 years to the Fund and €315 million is allocated to the Fund for the period 2019-2022. Housing for All, commits to the incorporation of activation of vacant properties in the key criteria for future funding.
5D	Work in close partnership with other relevant Government Departments on addressing such issues as rural vacancy, examining possible measures to address vacant homes when an owner moves to nursing home care under the Nursing Home Support Scheme and exploration of possible taxation measures and providing additional legislative powers to increase capacity of local authorities to bring vacant properties back to use.	Ongoing	The Department has been working intensively with the Department of Health who are the lead department on the Nursing Home Support Scheme and, as a result, the Government has introduced amendments to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme to cap the payment on sale of an applicant's principal private residence to three years. Up to now the sale of a principal private residence by a Fair Deal applicant could have led to uncapped contributions to the scheme. The amendments brought forward will cap this contribution to three years at 7.5% of the value of the property per annum, as is the case where the property remains unsold. In line with the commitment in Housing for All, further amendments are expected to be made to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme in order to exempt rental income from a principal private residence when calculating the income of an applicant.

### Local Authorities

369. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the local authorities that have a full-time vacant homes officer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9719/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In January 2022, my Department communicated with local authorities outlining that it is increasing the funding made available since 2018 from €50,000 to €60,000 per annum from mid-2022 to support the work of a Vacant Homes Office including a vacant homes officer to support the commitment in Housing for All to ensuring that vacant homes officers are full-time officers. Local authorities have been requested to arrange for the vacant homes officer position to become full-time by the end of Q2 2022 and to notify my Department accordingly. My Department understands that there are currently 3 full-time vacant homes officers in Clare and Kerry County Councils, and Dublin City Council, respectively.

The provision of central funding reinforces the capacity of local authorities to ensure a dedi-

cated focus on tackling vacancy and dereliction with a view to increasing the opportunities for residential development.

## Housing Policy

370. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his definition of an affordable home in financial terms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9720/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** The Affordable Housing Act 2021, the first ever standalone affordable housing legislation, established 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.

This Act, supported by the unprecedented levels of funding committed to in the Housing for All strategy, averaging over €4 billion annually, will underpin the delivery of affordable housing targets. Specifically, 54,000 affordable homes will be delivered between now and 2030 by local authorities, Approved Housing Bodies, the Land Development Agency and through a strategic partnership between the State and retail banks.

There is no single or universally applicable definition denoting housing affordability. Typically, benchmark figures of between 30% and 40% spending of net household income on housing can be used by policy makers and commentators as ‘rule of thumb’ measures of affordability. However, the limitations of such indicators is also frequently referenced given they do not consider household circumstance and expenditure that may, or may not, arise such as childcare and education costs or tenure type.

Therefore defining affordability is not simply a question of *‘how much is too much?’*, and may be better answered by asking *‘how much is too much for whom and in what circumstance?’* This is why our affordable purchase schemes will provide for a household specific assessment of affordability. This strives to contribute to a more developed, responsive and appropriate housing system that offers people real choice for affordable housing when they need it.

Under the provisions of the Affordable Housing Act, each household’s capacity to purchase or rent a home in the required location will be considered. Where households are deemed not to be able purchase a home in the private market, or secure a tenancy at the prevailing market rates, affordable housing supports will be made available. These assessments will be informed by the Central Bank of Ireland’s macro prudential rules which have been designed specifically to prevent house buyers from borrowing more than they can afford and to increase the financial resilience of borrowers.

The Local Authority Affordable Purchase Scheme will support purchasers of Local Authority-delivered new homes by bridging the gap between the value of the home and the combined value of the buyer’s available mortgage and deposit. Regulations to set out the detailed criteria are at an advanced stage and will be issued in the coming weeks. The first homes delivered through the scheme will be located in Cork City. Cork City Council indicated the purchase prices to be €218,000 for a 2-bedroom and €243,000 for a 3-bedroom dwelling. This will be

followed by a Fingal County Council supported affordable purchase development (Dun Emer). Fingal County Council have indicated these will cost €166,000 for a 2-bed apartment and between €206,000 and €258,000 for 3-bed dwellings. A scale up of Local Authority-delivered affordable homes will be implemented under the Housing for All targets.

The First Home shared equity scheme, under Part 4 of the Affordable Housing Act, will primarily support first-time buyers purchasing newly constructed homes on the private market. This scheme will be available at a national level and will incorporate regional price caps reflecting median house price sales. Confirmation of the final details of this scheme is ongoing in conjunction with the relevant stakeholders and it is anticipated that the First Home scheme will be available for applications in Q2 of this year. This initiative is being designed to ensure support is provided to those that, because of the current income levels, cannot secure a sufficient mortgage to meet the cost of a modest newly constructed home in their preferred location.

Part 3 of the Affordable Housing Act provided for the establishment of a Cost Rental sector in Ireland. The introduction of Cost Rental tenancies helps improve affordability and security in the rental market. Cost Rental tenancies rent levels are based on the cost of the provision of homes, rather than being subject to the pressures of the open market. Once tenanted, rents will increase only in line with consumer inflation, remaining stable in real terms, while continuing to cover management and maintenance costs on the properties.

Over 1,500 Cost Rental homes are expected to be developed and tenanted through three delivery strands in 2022: Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), supported by Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) funding; Local Authorities through the Affordable Housing Fund (AHF), and the Land Development Agency (LDA), either on their portfolio of sites, or through Project Tosaigh. All Cost Rental homes will deliver rent prices at least 25% below market rates.

The first 65 Cost Rental homes, delivered through CREL funding, were tenanted in 2021, with 25 at Taylor Hill in Balbriggan and a further 40 at Barnhall Meadows in Leixlip. Both developments delivered cost-covering rents at least 40% below comparable open-market prices within their respective local areas.

Additionally the Help-to-Buy incentive supports first-time buyers in meeting the deposit requirements for newly-built houses or apartments, as well as self-build homes. Subject to the level of income tax and DIRT paid over the previous 4 years, the Help-to-Buy scheme provides a maximum benefit to first-time buyers of €30,000 or 10% of the cost of the newly constructed home. The Help-to-Buy scheme has already helped over 30,000 first-time buyers achieve the deposit required for a new home.

The Local Authority Home Loan scheme commenced on 4 January 2022 and incorporates a lower interest rate, higher income eligibility thresholds for single applicants in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Louth, Meath and Wicklow (increasing from €50,000 to €65,000), and more flexibility on house size. The loan can be used for new and second-hand properties, or for self-builds with a maximum value of 90% of market value of a residential property. The maximum market values are €320,000 in the counties Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Louth, Meath and Wicklow, and €250,000 in the rest of the country.

The Help-to-Buy scheme, the Local Authority Affordable Purchase Scheme and the First Home scheme are designed to assist first-time buyers in meeting the higher costs of newly constructed homes and, in doing so, will increase the volume of new homes being developed. Importantly the CSO reported that housing completions amounted to 20,433 in 2021, a welcome increase over the 2015 reported levels of 7,219. The CSO also report that Commencement Notices for 30,724 new homes were issued in 2021, representing a 42% increase compared with 2020, or roughly the same as the combined reported totals from 2016 & 2017. While these

reported figures represent a significant step forward in the Government's ambition to support the supply of new housing, it remains short of the 33,000 new dwellings annual target under Housing for All. This is why the Government has committed unprecedented levels of funding, averaging €4 billion per year to improve affordability for all families or individuals across society wishing to secure a home.

### Housing Provision

371. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social homes that were retrofitted in 2021; the target that was set; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9721/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Energy Efficiency Programme for 2021 was the first year of a newly revised ten year programme designed to help deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to retrofitting 500,000 homes by 2030 to a B2/cost optimal BER standard. It is expected that approximately 36,500 of those will be local authority owned homes.

€65 million of Exchequer funding was made available to support this work in 2021, with €20 million allocated under the Midlands Retrofit Pilot as part of the 'Just Transition' programme, and the balance of €45 million under the 2021 Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme. A breakdown of the latter allocation along with the minimum target number of homes each local authority was required to retrofit is outlined in the table below.

Local Authority:	Min no of target units:	Allocation €45m
Carlow	22	€595,514
Cavan	24	€649,652
Clare	31	€839,134
Cork City	123	€3,329,467
Cork County	85	€2,300,851
Donegal	58	€1,569,993
DCC - M&E & Voids	347	€7,699,139
DLR	54	€1,461,717
Fingal	65	€1,759,475
Galway City	29	€784,996
Galway County	47	€1,272,235
Kerry	51	€1,380,511
Kildare	55	€1,488,786
Kilkenny	29	€784,996
Laois	31	€839,134
Leitrim	10	€270,688
Limerick	60	€1,624,130
Longford	20	€541,377
Louth	52	€1,407,580
Mayo	21	€568,446
Meath	41	€1,109,822
Monaghan	22	€595,514
Offaly	21	€568,446

Local Authority:	Min no of target units:	Allocation €45m
Roscommon	26	€703,790
SDCC	117	€3,167,054
Sligo	28	€757,928
Tipperary	60	€1,624,130
Waterford	62	€1,678,268
Westmeath	25	€676,721
Wexford	54	€1,461,717
Wicklow	55	€1,488,786
Totals:	1725	€45,000,000

The revised 2021 programme was designed to move local authorities from a ‘shallow’ to a ‘deeper retrofit’ programme, with the target of approximately 2,400 homes being upgraded, including 750 homes under the Midlands Retrofit Programme.

An annualised breakdown of the units retrofitted under the Energy Efficiency Retrofit programme for the years 2013-2021, is available on my Department’s website at the following links.

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/668c1-energy-efficiency-retrofitting-programme-expenditure-output/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/668c1-energy-efficiency-retrofitting-programme-expenditure-output/).

[www.gov.ie/en/publication/b86b3-midlands-energy-retrofit-programme-expenditure-and-units/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b86b3-midlands-energy-retrofit-programme-expenditure-and-units/).

### Tax Code

372. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the analysis his Department has carried out into the reintroduction of a non-principal private residence tax on second homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9726/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Local Government (Charges) Act 2009, as amended by the Local Government (Household Charge) Act 2011, provides the legislative basis for the non-principal private residence (NPPR) charge. The NPPR charge, which has since been discontinued, applied from 2009 to 2013 to any residential property in which the owner did not reside as their normal place of residence. The self-assessed charge was set at €200 per annum.

2013 was the last year in which a NPPR liability could be incurred. However, outstanding NPPR liabilities and payments remain payable to the relevant local authority.

NPPR charges, including late payment fees, expire 12 years from the date of liability. This means that NPPR liabilities incurred from 2009 to 2013 and remaining unpaid, the portion of the liability and charge on a property which related to 2009 expired in 2021, the 2010 portion will expire in 2022 and so on until the liability and charge on a property relating to the final year of NPPR in 2013, expires after 31 March 2025.

There is no intention to re-introduce the NPPR charge. It was discontinued in 2013 in parallel with the introduction of the Local Property Tax, which has a much broader applicability.

## Local Authorities

373. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the local authorities that have a domestic violence officer. [9794/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Under Section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authority for which he or she is responsible. My Department oversees workforce planning for the local government sector, including the monitoring of local government sector employment levels. To this end, my Department gathers aggregate quarterly data on staff numbers in each local authority on a whole time equivalent basis.

However, granular data, in terms of individual roles in local authorities is not collected and consequently is not available in my Department. The relevant information should be available from each local authority.

Local authorities do assist victims of domestic violence in meeting their emergency and long-term housing needs. My Department has issued policy and procedural guidance to local authorities on the role they can play to assist victims of domestic violence which is available at the following link:

*[www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e168-guidance-for-housing-authorities-for-assisting-victims-of-domestic-violence-with-emergency-and-long-term-accommodation-needs/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e168-guidance-for-housing-authorities-for-assisting-victims-of-domestic-violence-with-emergency-and-long-term-accommodation-needs/)*.

The guidance is also a useful reference for service providers, highlighting where they can be of greatest assistance to their clients, covering a range of scenarios that may arise for victims of domestic violence currently in receipt of social housing support and those seeking social housing supports.

## Housing Policy

374. **Deputy Brid Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 386 of 15 February 2022, the way that suitability is determined regarding accommodation; the way that bed space numbers are determined in a dwelling; if there are any guidelines or regulations on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9824/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) do not have guidelines specifically on this issue. The RTB Dispute Resolution process gives parties two options to resolve a tenancy dispute. The first option is Mediation which aims to resolve disputes with an independent Mediator in a mutually agreeable way or the second option is Adjudication where an independent decision is made based on the facts and evidence presented before an independent Adjudicator. If case parties are not satisfied with the outcome of either of these options, then the case can go to a second stage Tribunal process which will rehear the matter and make a binding decision based on the facts and evidence presented. Both Adjudicators and Tribunal Members roles are similar and are referred to as Decision Makers, with independent decisions made.

The RTB provides a range of information on its website on *[www.rtb.ie/ending-a-tenancy](http://www.rtb.ie/ending-a-tenancy)* with regard to lawfully terminating tenancies.

When determining a case for the validity of a Notice of termination where the dwelling is

no longer suitable for the tenants' accommodation needs, a Decision Maker may assess several areas to make his or her determination. For example, the decision maker may

- assess how many bed spaces are contained in the dwelling and what is the size and composition of the household to see if the dwelling is suitable for the household. The Decision Maker can note the actual number of beds in the dwelling but also assess the appropriate number of bed spaces that would be suitable for the dwelling;

- review and consider the statement that the landlord provides to the tenants (along with the Notice of Termination) which outlines why the landlord believes the dwelling is no longer suitable, having regard to the above factors; and

- assess a range of evidence including dimensions of the room or photographs of the dwelling.

A Decision Maker considers all matters that he or she considers would impact on the current suitability of the rented dwelling for the sitting tenants.

From 2019 to 2021, the RTB received copies of 94 Notices of Termination (representing 2% of all such notices received) where the landlord has indicated that the dwelling is no longer suitable to accommodate the needs of the tenant.

### **Public Services Provision**

375. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9836/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department has not won any award from this publication.

### **Rental Sector**

376. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to alter the minimum standards as set out in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 to include fully maintaining intercom systems for each unit in large multi-unit buildings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9849/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Minimum standards for rental accommodation are prescribed in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 made under section 18 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992. The Regulations specify requirements in relation to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light, fire safety and the safety of gas, oil and electrical supplies.

All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties comply with these regulations. Responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

There are no plans at present to amend the minimum rental standards to include maintaining intercom systems for each unit in multi-unit developments. However, the Regulations are kept under continuous review by my Department.

## **Wildlife Protection**

377. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the budget assigned for the establishment of the wildlife crime unit in 2022; the number of staff planned for the unit; when the staff will be in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9894/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** The function of the enhanced Wildlife Crime Unit (to be known as Wildlife Crime Operations) is to support the law enforcement work that has been, and continues to be done by National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Regional staff. Some 110 staff, including District Conservation Officers and Conservation Rangers are working across the country to address wildlife crime. Since December 2020, conservation ranger numbers have increased by 18%. There are currently 86 conservation rangers stationed around the country to enforce wildlife laws; and they are supported by District Conservation Officers, Regional Managers and Divisional Managers. It is my intention to further increase ranger numbers up to 120 and my Department is working towards this goal.

Funding for training, equipment, staffing or other requirements for the operation are met through the increased NPWS budget.

## **Fire Service**

378. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of a review of the retained fire service that was approved by the Management Board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management; if he will fully publish the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9921/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003. My Department supports fire authorities through setting general policy, providing the legislative framework, running a central training programme and issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for priority infrastructural projects. Fire services issues are managed in my Department by the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management (NDFEM).

Fire services are provided in Ireland by local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. Under this legislation, there are 31 fire authorities which provide fire prevention and fire protection services for communities through 27 service delivery structures. Local authority fire services are delivered by approximately 3,300 local authority staff engaged at 217 fire stations nationwide. 16 of these stations being staffed by full-time firefighters, a further 4 are mixed full-time and retained, and 197 are staffed by retained firefighters, with approximately 2,065 retained firefighters around the country. It is important to note that the numbers of fire service front-line staff have been maintained at a constant high level throughout the economic challenges of the past number of years, even when staffing numbers, by necessity, were reduced in other areas of the local authority sector.

In 2013, my Department published 'Keeping Communities Safe (KCS) - A Framework for Fire Safety in Ireland'. The adoption of KCS as national policy saw national norms/ standards being established for fire services in Ireland for the first time, against which local authority fire

services could benchmark themselves. The report of the Fire Service Validation Group, ‘ Fire Services in Ireland, Local Delivery - National Consistency’, published in 2016, noted the staffing arrangements in place in fire services across Ireland to achieve these standards and that fire services manage staffing levels in fire stations to achieve the national standards of fire service response.

The provision of fire services by local authorities is based on a risk management approach which involves an analysis of the nature of the fire hazards and the incidence and extent of fires which occur, as well as the fire protection measures in place. There has been a welcome downward trend in the incidence of fire, with the fire fatality rate per million of population, using a three-year average, currently at 4.3 deaths per million of population. While each death is one too many, this figure is a third of what it was twenty years ago when it stood at 12.9 deaths per million of population and positions Ireland among countries with very low fire fatality rates.

In May 2021, the Management Board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management mandated a small internal project team to undertake a review of the model of local authority ‘retained’ fire services delivery, with particular emphasis on the recruitment and retention of staff, with the proviso that due consideration also be given to input from the County and City Management Association (CCMA).

The objective of the review is to explore and understand the issues which are impacting on service delivery, to undertake research and analysis and to propose options which will underpin the continuing provision of effective and inclusive local authority fire services into the future. The Project Team will work with and report to the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management Fire Service Operations Committee in the performance of its functions.

The initial engagement element of the review was the gathering of appropriate data and information, to inform the needs analysis and option appraisals for further development. To that end, the project team undertook a procurement process and have secured the services of an independent consultant who will survey the views of the personnel who work in the retained fire services and those that have recently retired from the retained fire services. That feedback in conjunction with consultation at appropriate stages with all key stakeholders during the review process, including central and local government, the public, fire service management/staff, and the staffing interest groups will form the basis of the final review report.

The final report is now in an early drafting stage, it is the expectation of the project team that the final review report will be submitted to the Management Board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management later in 2022. Upon receipt of the final report, the Management Board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management will make a determination on the publication of the report.

### **Local Authorities**

379. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of litter wardens in each local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9924/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** Under Section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authority for which he or she is responsible.

My Department oversees workforce planning for the local government sector, including the

monitoring of local government sector employment levels. To this end, my Department gathers aggregate quarterly data on staff numbers in each local authority on a whole time equivalent basis.

However, granular data, in terms of the number of litter wardens in each local authority, is not collected and consequently is not available in my Department. The relevant information should be available from each local authority.

### Housing Schemes

380. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of times the discretionary top-up for HAP payments was used in 2021 in County Wexford by municipal district; the average percentage amount of this top-up per municipal district; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9933/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme plays a vital role in housing eligible families and individuals. At the end of Q3 2021, over 97,000 HAP tenancies had been set-up since the scheme commenced, of which there were more than 62,000 households actively in receipt of HAP support, including 1,554 households in Wexford. Local authorities have discretion, because of local rental market conditions, to exceed the maximum rent limit by up to 20%, or up to 50% in the Dublin region for those households either in, or at immediate risk of homelessness. It is a matter for each local authority to determine whether the application of a discretionary increase is warranted, and the level of such an increase, on a case-by-case basis. A breakdown of the number of HAP tenancies at end Q3 2021 and the average discretionary increase paid for each of the municipal districts in Wexford is detailed in the table below.

Municipal Area	Active Tenancies @ end Q3 2021	No. of tenancies that received discretion	Average Discretion Rate
Enniscorthy	330	151	18%
Gorey/Kilmuckridge	340	228	21%
New Ross	290	137	17%
Wexford Borough	468	269	19%
Rosslare	72	42	18%
Other*	54	24	20%

\*Inter-authority movements, whilst the tenant is registered with Wexford County Council, the tenancy is located outside of the county.

Section 43 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014, gives the Minister the power to determine the appropriate amount of rent for qualified households, where the household class is not already prescribed for in the HAP regulations. This is mainly used for larger families. The figure for Gorey/ Kilmuckridge municipal district is above the 20% discretion available to local authorities as there are a number of Section 43 determinations included in the calculation.

### Departmental Communications

381. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[9963/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department does not utilise the application referred to in the Question as an official means of communication. I do not have the application referred to installed on my official Department phone.

*Question No. 382 answered with Question No. 363.*

### **Vacant Properties**

383. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of vacant council houses in each municipal district in Cork county and each ward of Cork City. [10124/22]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Local authorities will always have a level of vacancy in their housing stock. This will fluctuate over time as tenancy surrender and re-letting of dwelling is an ongoing process. Therefore, ongoing data in relation to vacant local authority owned homes are not collated by my Department.

However, statistics in relation to social housing stock, at a point in time, are published by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) in their Annual Reports on Performance Indicators in Local Authorities. These reports provide a range of information in relation to social housing stock, including levels of vacancy in local authority owned properties by local authority area. The most recent report, relating to 2020, is available on the NOAC website at the following link:

[noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NOAC-Local-Authority-Performance-Indicator-Report-2020.pdf](https://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NOAC-Local-Authority-Performance-Indicator-Report-2020.pdf).

### **Passport Services**

384. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if an original UK passport submitted as part of an application for an Irish passport can be returned immediately in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9073/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service has given the applicant an update on what is required for them to have their UK passport returned.

### **Passport Services**

385. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application by a person (details supplied) will be reviewed and expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9099/22]

399. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when passports are likely to issue for persons (details supplied) who are due to travel on 2 May 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9915/22]

404. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application will be processed for a person (details supplied) ahead of travel time on 6 April 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10128/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 385, 399 and 404 together.

With regard to the specific passport applications referenced by the Deputies, the Passport Service has provided a status update to the applicant.

### **Passport Services**

386. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport application by a person (details supplied) received by the Passport Office on 3 June 2021 will be dealt with in view of the fact that it has an estimated issue date of 25 November; when documents pertaining to the parent of the child will be returned to them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9182/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service has provided an update to the applicant's parents as to the steps they must take to progress their passport application and on the return of their passports.

### **Visa Applications**

387. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will examine a visa application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9214/22]

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

### **Passport Services**

388. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason it is now taking up to 40 working days for parents' passports to be returned to them after the child's passport has been completely processed and delivered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9284/22]

389. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reasons for completed documents such as the parents' passports being held by the passport office and not posted when a child's passport is completed and posted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9285/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 388 and 389 together.

The Passport Services prioritises dispatching the applicant's passport once it has been issued. Supporting documents submitted with the application are dispatched separately and, de-

pending on current volumes, can take between 2 and 4 weeks to be returned to the applicant or their guardians.

The Passport Service is actively working to reduce the number of original documents required to be submitted with a passport application. The Passport Service now accepts a certified copy of a parent's Irish passport to be submitted with a child's first time application rather than the original. This allows the parent to retain their passport to facilitate any travel they may need to undertake while their child's passport is being processed and while they await the return of documentation.

My Department has been pro-actively planning to ensure the necessary resources are in place to meet the current and expected level of demand in 2022 and is making an unprecedented investment in the Passport Service in terms of additional staff and improvements to the passport processing and customer service systems. This will help to improve customer experience and reduce turnaround times, including the return of supporting documents.

*Question No. 389 answered with Question No. 388.*

### **Foreign Birth Registration**

390. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will intervene in the registration of foreign birth application in the case of a person (details supplied). [9374/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department is responsible for citizenship by descent through the Foreign Births Register under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended.

The processing of Foreign Birth Registration (FBR) 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 application referenced was registered on 17 January 2020, and is due to be processed in the near future. A member of the FBR team will be in contact with the applicant 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.

### **Northern Ireland**

391. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the situation in Maghaberry Jail in which prisoners are being denied open visits despite the fact that Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted in the society outside the prison complex; if he will raise this matter with the authorities to ensure that the visiting regime being currently imposed does not lead to heightened tensions in the jail and that families that have been separated due to Covid-19 are not made to suffer further than needs be; and if he will make

a statement on the matter. [9424/22]

402. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions he or his officials have had since Christmas 2021 with the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Office and with members of the Northern Ireland executive and administration regarding the prison conditions relating to republican prisoners held in HMP Maghaberry and HMP Hydebank Prisons, particularly issues relating to the conditions attaching to family visits, controlled movement, full body searching and educational issues; if these discussions have also covered the issues of extremely long remand and bail periods for prisoners awaiting trial for up to and over seven years in some cases; the response he has received in relation to these matters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10026/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 391 and 402 together.

Responsibility for Maghaberry and Hydebank prisons rests with the Northern Ireland Prison Service, which is overseen by the Northern Ireland Department of Justice.

As is the case with prisons in this jurisdiction, the overriding concern in recent times has been the health and safety within the prisons due to Covid 19. It is understood that Maghaberry Prison has so far had a good record in preventing cases of Covid 19 in the prison. Improvements in educational provision and other practices and procedures have had to be adapted or suspended due to the health and safety arrangements on Covid 19 prevention; it is expected that these will be restored as soon as is practicable.

Prison conditions in Northern Ireland, including for those in Maghaberry and Hydebank prisons, have been part of my regular dialogue with Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. In addition, Departmental officials engage on a regular and ongoing basis with a range of interlocutors across the devolved and non-devolved authorities, including the ICRC to discuss, explore and encourage progress.

The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC), established by treaty between the Irish and British Governments, reports on the implementation of the Northern Ireland Executive's Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme. Among the actions under the programme is a commitment from the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland to revisit the framework related to the separated regime and arrange for an independent review of the operation of the regime. The IRC noted in its most recent report (published December 2021) that the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland plans an independent review of the separated regime but that this work would require Ministerial consideration and approval.

### **Passport Services**

392. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason that it took the Passport Office 92 working days to revert to a parent regarding a first-time online passport application for a minor; when this passport will be dispatched; if it will issue in time for their travel plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9434/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** With regard to the specific passport application about which the Deputy is enquiring, the online application was registered on 22 September 2021. However, the Passport Service cannot process a first time application without any supporting documents. Supporting documents for this application were received on 10 February 2022.

The Passport Service has given the applicant's parent an update on the current status of the application.

### Passport Services

393. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9553/22]

395. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will ensure that a passport application by a person (details supplied) in which the original renewal application was made in September 2021 will be processed urgently by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9650/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 393 and 395 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has issued passports to the applicants.

### Departmental Advertising

394. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9575/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department engages in public awareness campaigns where there is important information that needs to be brought to the attention of citizens. Some examples of these campaigns have included the "Getting Ireland Brexit Ready" campaign and public information on travel restrictions due to COVID-19. My Department has not paid for the placement of advertisements, features or other content in the magazine in question.

*Question No. 395 answered with Question No. 393.*

### Maritime Jurisdiction

396. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Ministers for Defence, Transport or Agriculture, Food and the Marine drew to his attention and that of his Department in the past 20 years the matter of military exercises being carried out in Ireland's exclusive economic zone by foreign armed forces, ahead of, during or after such military exercises; if he had correspondence with the countries involved in relation to Ireland's neutrality, territorial waters and exclusive economic zone, the appropriateness of such exercises and the scope of same; if he or officials from his Department liaised or communicated with each country in relation to the exercises; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9653/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) a coastal state has only limited sovereign rights and jurisdiction in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – a maritime zone extending up to 200 nautical miles from shore. These rights pertain mainly to the exploration, exploitation, conservation and management of natural resources (living and non-living) and the protection of the marine environment.

Pursuant to Article 58 of UNCLOS, all states enjoy various high seas freedoms in the coastal state's EEZ, including freedom of navigation "and other internationally lawful uses of the sea related to these freedoms". The EEZ is therefore a hybrid maritime zone in which some sovereign rights of the coastal state overlap with high seas freedoms of all states. Article 58 requires that in the exercise of these freedoms states 'shall have due regard to the rights and duties of the coastal state.'

While states are not obliged, in most cases, to inform the coastal authorities of any proposed naval exercises, my Department's attention has indeed been drawn to some such exercises that have taken place in Ireland's EEZ in the past. Where relevant, officials have engaged with the states concerned, including to ensure that any such exercises are conducted with due regard to our own exercise of sovereign rights in the area. Where a planned exercise includes use of international airspace, the state concerned must follow the agreed international procedure (as set down by the International Civil Aviation Organisation) for notifying the relevant authorities responsible for providing air traffic control services for the airspace affected.

I want to take this opportunity to distinguish between this and the situation regarding our territorial sea, which extends up to 12 nautical miles from shore. The coastal state exercises sovereignty within its territorial sea subject to the relevant rules of international law. Within the territorial sea of a coastal state the ships of other states, including their warships, enjoy the right of innocent passage only – not freedom of navigation. This means that naval exercise may not be conducted by them within the territorial sea except with the express consent of the coastal state. The submarines of other states are required to navigate on the surface.

Should a foreign naval or other state vessel used for non-commercial purposes wish to access an Irish port or harbour, my permission is required as Minister for Foreign Affairs, and a diplomatic clearance procedure is in place to consider requests for such permissions.

### **British-Irish Co-operation**

397. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there is an official or unofficial arrangement between the Irish State and the United Kingdom that allows the Royal Air Force to conduct armed operations within the Irish airspace. [9821/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** As stated in response to previous Parliamentary Questions, I cannot comment on reports concerning arrangements for national security. The Government's engagement in international security cooperation is aimed at ensuring public safety and is conducted with full respect for Irish sovereign decision-making authority and for Ireland's long-standing policy of military neutrality.

### **Public Services Provision**

398. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9833/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department has not won any awards from the publication in question.

*Question No. 399 answered with Question No. 385.*

## Departmental Communications

400. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9960/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Records previously released by my Department in response to Freedom of Information requests confirm use by me of the application referred to in the Deputy's question. I do not use the setting referenced.

## Election Monitoring Missions

401. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 387 of 8 February 2022, if he will address an additional query (details supplied) in relation to vacancies on a retirement roster; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10016/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy) (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Ireland's current International Election Observation Roster has 197 active members, sufficient to enable Ireland to continue to respond to calls for nominate observers to election observation missions organised by the European Union and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The current roster will expire on 31 December 2023.

*Question No. 402 answered with Question No. 391.*

## Diplomatic Representation

403. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he plans to appoint full-time cultural officer posts for the Irish Embassies in Warsaw and Rome. [10063/22]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The appointment of full-time specialist Cultural Officers in priority locations worldwide has been identified in the Government's Global Ireland 2025 strategy as a key action to widen and deepen our global cultural presence and engagement. Five positions in Berlin, London, New York, Los Angeles and Beijing have been filled to date in a close partnership between my Department and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Consideration is being given at present to further such appointments in priority locations and regions as part of the Global Ireland programme, subject to resources and to local conditions and requirements. The cultural briefs in Warsaw and Rome are currently managed by the relevant Embassy's diplomatic staff.

*Question No. 404 answered with Question No. 385.*

## Defence Forces

405. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the timelines involved in the implementation of the recently published report on the commission on the Future of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9116/22]

406. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if he plans to establish a committee to oversee the implementation of the report on the Commission of the Defence Forces; the way that the committee will be constituted; if there will be a Government member as part of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9117/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 405 and 406 together.

The Commission on the Defence Forces was established on foot of a commitment in the Programme for Government and the Government decision in December 2020 which also agreed its terms of reference and membership.

I welcomed the publication of the report of the Commission which was launched on 9 February 2022. The Commission have undertaken a significant body of work encompassing wide-ranging terms of reference. The report contains 69 main recommendations and together with sub recommendations, there are 130 recommendations. The Commission's terms of reference included the consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing for the Army, the Air Corps and the Naval Service.

The report proposes significant changes for the Defence Forces, including to high-level command and control structures, and for the level of Defence provision in Ireland. Clearly, there are matters that will require careful consideration and in some critical aspects inter-departmental discussion and agreement. This includes the level of resourcing that may be allocated to Defence and the governance framework that will be required to underpin any changes the Government approve on foot of the Commission's report. I will also be seeking the views of my Department and the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces Representative Associations will be consulted on all matters that fall within the scope of representation, relating to the implementation of any approved plan. I also intend to engage with key stakeholders and the Oireachtas, which commenced with the Dáil statement on the report which took place on 16 February. When these deliberations are completed I intend to revert to Government with a proposed plan of action.

It is anticipated that this process will take at least four to five months in order to bring a considered and comprehensive proposal back to Government to address the fundamental issues that the Commission have set out.

*Question No. 406 answered with Question No. 405.*

## **Defence Forces**

407. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the exact amount being deducted from the pension of a person (details supplied) each month as a result of a court settlement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9391/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The person in question served in the Defence Forces from 1979 to 1985 before being discharged "Below Army Physical Standards". This period of service was below the minimum length of service required to qualify for an occupational or service pension; however, a Short Service Gratuity was paid at the time.

The person in question separately applied for a disability pension under the Army Pensions Acts, which he was awarded in 1986. In 1986 the value of his disability pension was €4,071 (£3,206) per year. The current rate of his disability pension is €13,749 a year.

The person in question also instituted civil proceedings in respect of the same injury and in July 1986 the High Court awarded him compensation of €37,457 (£29,500). His disability pension was therefore reviewed by the Minister for Defence in accordance with the provisions of Section 13(2) of the Army Pensions Act, 1923 (as amended). Section 13(2) provides:-

“Any compensation which may be received from or on behalf of the person alleged to be responsible for the act which caused the wounding..... may be taken into consideration in fixing the amount of any pension, allowance or gratuity which might be awarded under this Act to or in respect of such person and if such compensation is received after the award of any such pension or allowance the Minister may review the award and, having regard to the amount of such compensation, either terminate or reduce the amount thereof”

The underlying objective of Section 13(2) is to take into consideration compensation paid ‘on the double’ for the same disablement.

In March 1987, the then Minister for Defence decided under the provisions of Section 13(2) to reduce the disability pension in question by the annuity value (as assessed by an Actuary) of the civil compensation received. The annuity value of the civil compensation was assessed at €3,648 (£2,873) a year.

The person in question applied to the High Court for a judicial review of the Minister’s decision to reduce his pension. The High Court decided that he had not been given adequate opportunity to present his case before the decision to reduce the disability pension was made. The Court quashed the decision to reduce the disability pension and ordered that the matter be considered anew. The Court did not express any view as to the outcome of the review. The Department consented to the High Court’s decision and an Order to this effect was made. The Order did not preclude the then Minister for Defence from arriving at the same decision made previously.

A fresh review of the disability pension was undertaken and all aspects of the case, including, in particular, representations made by his solicitors, were fully considered. In March 1988 the then Minister decided to take into account all of the civil compensation received by him and to reduce the disability pension by the assessed annuity value of that compensation. The reduction took place from 1 April 1988, some two years after the date of discharge and after payment of the pension had commenced.

As the annuity value was assessed at €3,648 (£2,873) a year the effect of the decision under Section 13(2) is to reduce the rate of disability pension payable from €13,749 to €10,101 a year at the current rates payable. The annual deduction of €3,648 equates to a monthly deduction of €304. (Defence Forces’ disability pensions are not subject to Income Tax.) The annuity value has remained fixed at €3,648 per annum since 1988; however, the annual value of the disability pension has increased over time from €4,071 (£3,206) in 1986 to a current value of €13,749.

### **Departmental Advertising**

408. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Defence the amount his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9570/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department has had two advertisements in the Public Sector Magazine since 2013.

The requested information is set out in the table.

Item	Year	Cost
Advertisement in the Public Sector Award Magazine	2017	€2084.85
Advertisement in the Public Sector Award Magazine	2016	€2152.50

### Defence Forces

409. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Defence the number of buildings assigned to the Reserve Defence Forces currently lying idle or unused; the number that require private security; and the cost of providing that private security in each of the past three years in tabular form. [9804/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The information sought by the Deputy is not readily available in the format sought. My Department has requested these details from the military authorities and as soon as this material is received, I will arrange to have same forwarded to the Deputy.

### Public Services Provision

410. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Defence if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9828/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department received one Award from the Public Sector Magazine since 2013. In 2017 Civil Defence were the outright winners for Best Support to the Emergency Services.

### Departmental Communications

411. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9955/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My official Government phone is supplied by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). Records previously released by DFA in response to Freedom of Information requests confirm use by me of the application referred to in the Deputy's question. I do not use the setting referenced.

### British-Irish Co-operation

412. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence if he has spoken formally with his UK counterpart in the past six months. [10072/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In my capacity as Minister of Defence, I have not spoken formally with the UK Secretary of State for Defence, Mr. Ben Wallace MP, in the past six months. Our last formal conversation was in July of 2020.

An in-person meeting was scheduled for April of last year in London but, due to unforeseen

circumstances, this meeting did not take place .

### **Defence Forces**

413. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence when refurbishment works will commence on the accommodation block (details supplied) at Renmore Barracks; and the expected duration of works. [10073/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am pleased to advise the Deputy that the upgrade project for the USAC building is now at an advanced stage, with tenders currently under examination in my Department and a contract award is expected shortly. It is expected construction works will commence in mid 2022 with a project timeframe of 12 months for completion.

### **Naval Service**

414. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence when refurbishment works will commence on blocks 4 and 8 in Haulbowline Naval Base; and the expected duration of works. [10074/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am pleased to advise the Deputy that the refurbishment works on Block 8 are now well advanced and work is scheduled for completion in the coming weeks. In relation to the refurbishment project for Block 4, I can confirm that my Department has in recent days appointed a design team to commence the detailed design work for this project, (block 4). Subject to the design and procurement process it is planned to have this project commence on site in late 2023.

### **Defence Forces**

415. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of Defence Forces personnel by rank in the Defence Forces equitation school as of 14 February 2022; the number of vacancies in the Defence Forces equitation school by rank; and when each of the vacancies will be filled in tabular form. [10075/22]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The table at the following link details the requested strength and vacancies, by rank, for the Army Equitation School, on 14 February 2022.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\_pq415-22-02-22\_en.docx">Army Equitation School</a>]

The military authorities advise that vacancies are filled on an ongoing basis in line with promotional arrangements and by recruitment via Cadetship and Army General Service (GSR) recruitment competitions.

An advertising campaign aimed at attracting suitable General Service Recruits is planned to commence shortly. Once such recruits are qualified as 3 star privates, they will be posted to the Equitation School as appropriate.

Additionally, cadetship competitions are also expected to be held shortly.

## **Public Sector Pensions**

416. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education when she will introduce an amendment to the public service superannuation scheme to allow access to the scheme for school secretaries and school caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10049/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries 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. On 27 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 13 September 2021, there was significant progress in this dispute. 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 additionally offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions. These offers are subject to agreement on all elements of the claim. Engagement is continuing, with the aim of reaching an overall agreement: the most recent formal talks took place at a meeting at the WRC on 26 January, and the parties are to meet again later this week, following reflection on the matters discussed at that meeting.

Public servant status and the associated access to a public service pension scheme is not a part of the current offer. As previously set out in the joint statement following the WRC engagement in May 2021, the final element of the claim in respect of public service status is acknowledged by all parties to be more complex and will require more detailed analysis and consideration following the conclusion of current discussions.

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

## **National Council for Special Education**

417. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education when the National Council for Special Education will complete and submit its policy advice on education provision in special classes and special schools first commissioned in September 2018. [9040/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** In September 2018, the then Minister for Education and Skills requested the NCSE to advise on future educational provision for students in special schools and classes and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them to achieve better outcomes.

The NCSE strives to ensure that its policy advice is informed by robust and wide-ranging consultative and research processes. Its policy advice is always informed by international best

practice.

The Deputy will be aware that NCSE published a progress report in November, 2019. At that stage, NCSE had reviewed existing educational provision in Ireland, conducted a detailed literature review, consulted various stakeholder groups and visited a number of Irish schools. NCSE had also looked at fully inclusive schools and practice in Canada and Portugal.

The report found no evidence to show that one type of special education placement is better than another. It also stated that any decision to move towards greater inclusion would require careful consideration and planning. It is not something that could be achieved in the short term.

Since the publication of the progress report, NCSE has conducted further research and analysis, engaged in a public consultation survey and has received further submissions and expert inputs. It has also examined the implications arising from the UNCRPD.

Before the advice is finalised, every effort is being made to ensure that NCSE has consulted widely with a view to developing shared understandings on the critical issues involved and proposed solutions.

The policy advice is expected to be completed in 2022.

### **School Staff**

418. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education the difference in operational terms between the teacher exchange scheme which operated until the 2018-2019 academic year and the scheme of temporary reassignment for registered teachers in recognised primary schools which commenced in the 2018-2019 academic year. [9048/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the Teacher Exchange Scheme for Registered Teachers in Recognised Primary Schools operated up to the 2018/18 academic year under the terms of Circular 17/2015. It provided for teachers to avail of an exchange with a teacher in another school for educational purposes for a period of up to 5 years.

Circular 54/2019 issued in the 2018/2019 academic year and set out the terms of the Temporary Reassignment Scheme for Primary Teachers. The primary difference between the two schemes is that the maximum period allowable under Circular 54/2019 is 3 years for the purpose of a temporary reassignment.

### **School Staff**

419. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education if there were examples of teachers who exceeded the allowed number of years that primary school teachers were allowed to avail of under the teacher exchange scheme and-or the scheme of temporary reassignment for registered teachers in recognised primary schools; and if so, the locations in which this occurred and the reasons. [9049/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that, in the current academic year, there are 18 teachers who have exceeded the 3 year permissible under the Temporary Reassignment Scheme for Primary Teachers as set out in Circular 0024/2019.

Due to the effects of the pandemic and the difficulties being experienced by people in terms

of relocating, etc. the Department relaxed the rules around the duration of a teacher reassignment arrangement as an exceptional matter for teachers who were in their 3rd year of their reassignment. The locations of these teachers are as follows:

Galway - 8 teachers

Kerry - 2 teachers

Dublin - 2 teachers

Westmeath - 2 teachers

Cavan - 1 teacher

Cork - 1 teacher

Leitrim - 1 teacher

Mayo - 1 teacher

The equivalent information for the teacher exchange scheme which ran up to the 2018/2019 academic year are not readily available at this time.

### **Special Educational Needs**

420. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education when funding will be allocated to provide full-time SNA hours for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9071/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assis-

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tants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically roll over into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website: [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools)

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website: [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Circular 0029/2021 has been published and advises schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 has been extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circulars 29/2021 and 30/2020 are available on the Gov.ie website: [www.gov.ie/en/circulars/?organisation=department-of-education](http://www.gov.ie/en/circulars/?organisation=department-of-education)

The NCSE have confirmed that the school (as per details supplied) was in contact with the NCSE on 17th February last seeking the assistance of an advisor on a separate matter, however the NCSE have stated that the school has not submitted an application to have its allocation of SNA support reviewed.

### School Facilities

421. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will provide funding for a bus shelter outside a school (details supplied) to meet the needs of students with disabilities who attend the school by bus given that it takes some time to embark and disembark the bus; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9074/22]

441. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education if funding will be made available for a bus shelter at a school (details supplied) in County Sligo; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9320/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 421 and 441 together.

The main focus of school building investment over the last decade and for the coming period is on the provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics. The second

half of the National Development Plan will see an increasing focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock.

While there is no dedicated funding for the provision of bus shelters at schools under my Department, schools can exercise an element of discretion in addressing such issues under funds provided through the Minor Works Grant.

### **Special Educational Needs**

422. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Education if she will examine the requirement for a special class, a second hearing impairment class, for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9075/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

This year, my Department will spend in excess of €2 Billion, or over 25% of the Department's budget on providing additional teaching and care supports for children with special educational needs.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children with special educational needs nationwide.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

Parents seeking special class placements for their children are advised to contact NCSE locally so that their needs can be taken into account for planning purposes.

The NCSE through their network of SENOs (Special Educational Needs Organisers) are currently engaged in a process of establishing new classes for the 2022/2023 school year and beyond. They are looking at local information in relation to projected demand for future special class places.

The local SENOs remain available to assist and advise parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: [ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list](https://www.ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list).

As the Deputy's query refers to an individual school, I will arrange to have the details referred to the NCSE for their attention and direct reply.

### **Special Educational Needs**

423. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application (details supplied) for an early intervention ASD class in County Wexford; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9084/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

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This year, my Department will spend in excess of €2 Billion, or over 25% of the Department's budget on providing additional teaching and care supports for children with special educational needs.

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It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

Parents seeking special class placements for their children are advised to contact NCSE locally so that their needs can be taken into account for planning purposes.

The NCSE through their network of SENOs (Special Educational Needs Organisers) are currently engaged in a process of establishing new classes for the 2022/2023 school year and beyond. They are looking at local information in relation to projected demand for future special class places.

The local SENOs remain available to assist and advise parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: [ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list](http://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list).

As the Deputy's query refers to an individual school, I will arrange to have the details referred to the NCSE for their attention and direct reply.

### **State Examinations**

424. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide details of the model for the certificate history essays for this year; the way it differs from last year's model and the traditional leaving certificate model; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9101/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

### **Schools Building Projects**

425. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education the person in her Department managing the delivery of the final permanent school building for a school (details supplied); and the contact details of the person. [9160/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school to which the Deputy refers is fully aware of the contact details of the officials in my Department dealing with the project. In addition, my Department officials communicate regularly with the Patron Body of the school on the progression of all building projects being delivered for schools under its patronage.

The major building project for this school is currently at Stage 3 - Tender Stage and is working through the tender process.

## **Teaching Qualifications**

426. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider changing the entry level qualifications to work as an SNA supporting children with additional needs to a level 6 qualification with particular reference to the fact that the entry requirement has not changed in 42 years and the need to upgrade the qualification due to the number and complexity of the needs of the children that SNAs work with on a daily basis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9162/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs

in our schools.

### **Schools Building Projects**

427. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education the progress regarding a school (details supplied); and if it is still on target to open and receive students in September 2022. [9166/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project referred to by the Deputy is currently in construction and will provide a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school with a 4 class SEN base when complete. Phase one of the project is due for completion in advance of the 2022/23 academic year.

### **Teaching Qualifications**

428. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education if she and the private secretary of her Department will meet with a union (details supplied) to discuss the updating of the educational requirements for new SNAs working within the education system; when the review of the education requirements for SNAs will begin; and her views on whether the current educational requirements for SNAs is out of touch with the requirements of the job and the needs of student. [9205/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department meets with Fórsa regularly in respect of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and, indeed, has established a forum which meets throughout the year specifically to engage with and consult on all matters relating to SNAs. Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as an SNA has been raised by Fórsa as a formal claim and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission and the Department is engaging in that process.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, the Department has indicated to Fórsa that it is open to reviewing the entry requirements for SNAs but has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. This review is being prioritised which will then be followed by a review of the entry qualifications in due course.

### **Teaching Qualifications**

429. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education her plans to facilitate the full recognition of post-primary school staff guidance counsellors as career guidance teachers. [9206/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can advise the Deputy that the recruitment and appointment of teachers to fill teaching posts is a matter for the individual school authority, subject to procedures agreed under Section 24(3) of the Education Act 1998 (as amended by the Education (Amendment) Act 2012).

To work as a guidance counsellor in a post-primary school a teacher must hold dual professional qualifications: that of **post-primary teacher** and that of **post-primary guidance counsellor**. There are sound educational and pedagogical reasons for the requirement to hold both as this is a complex role which involves both teaching and guidance counselling.

It is the view of the Department that in order to be able to execute the full range of functions of the guidance counsellor in a post-primary school, a person needs to hold both qualifications. Notwithstanding the similar modules in sector specific teacher training programmes, teachers qualified to work in primary or further education sectors would still require post-primary sector specific training to be deemed fully qualified to competently work as a post primary teacher and / or guidance counsellor in a post-primary setting.

The Teaching Council and the Department of Education are cognisant of the value of education in society, of the unique role which teachers play within the education system in providing for the holistic development of students, and of the complex and intricate nature of teaching as it is elaborated in the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers. The Council reiterates the critical objectives of promoting quality teaching and learning in all sectors.

Programmes of post-primary initial teacher education such as the Professional Master of Education (PME) prepare student teachers for core areas such as school and classroom planning, assessment, evaluation, classroom management and differentiated teaching to meet the age and stage appropriate needs of the individual learner. At the end of the initial teacher training PME course, students will have acquired the professional knowledge, understanding and skills needed to teach their subject or subjects in a post primary school. They will have gained practical experience 'school placement' in two contrasting school settings, and developed their ability to respond flexibly to the diverse and changing educational needs of students aged 12 to 18 years.

It remains the case that a person being assigned as a guidance counsellor must be a qualified and registered second-level teacher with the Teaching Council and, in addition, hold the relevant recognised qualification for school guidance work.

Information on the Programme Recognition Framework for Guidance Counselling can be found here: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/dce0a0-programme-recognition-framework-guidance-counselling/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dce0a0-programme-recognition-framework-guidance-counselling/)

### **Teaching Qualifications**

430. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider providing support towards the cost to allow a limited number of experienced teachers to receive a qualification as career guidance teachers. [9207/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Teacher Fee Refund Scheme is administered by Marino Institute of Education (MIE) on behalf of my Department and provides funding to serving teachers towards the cost of course participation and examination fees on successful completion of professional development courses that are directly relevant and of benefit to schools and that are subject to certification/award by an appropriate accreditation authority recognised by the Department.

Applications for funding under the Scheme are made retrospectively for a course undertaken during the previous academic year.

Following a review of the Teacher Fee Refund Scheme, in 2021 the Department announced that funding would be prioritised under the scheme for the following areas:

a. Upskilling for post primary teachers leading to registration with the Teaching Council in an additional subject, to support teacher supply at post-primary level

- b. Inclusion and tackling disadvantage
- c. Promoting well-being
- d. Digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment
- e. Improving students' literacy and numeracy
- f. Curricular initiatives including pre-identified areas of systemic need endorsed by school management (identified in the annual circular relating to the period in which course/year of course is completed).

Recently published Circulars 0001/2022 and 0015/2021 relate to this Scheme.

### **Schools Building Projects**

431. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made with a project (details supplied); if the tender documentation has been returned; when the next stage of planning is expected; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9212/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A major building project for the school in question has been devolved for delivery to Louth County Council.

There were some issues, including a design issue, that arose in respect of this project. This included how best to incorporate a revised Schedule of Accommodation which included an upgrade to a 4-Class SEN Base. Agreement on the best way forward was reached following discussions with Louth County Council, the Design Team and the school.

Planning drawings for the Part 8 application for the proposed extension were issued to Louth County Council in early October 2021 and went on public display on the 7th December 2021.

The Tender short-list for this project has now been confirmed. Tender documentation issued and the anticipated tender return date has now passed.

Following the completion of this tender process and a Departmental review of the Tender Assessment Report, construction will commence on-site. Providing no significant issues arise, the Department currently projects that construction should commence in Q2 2022.

### **School Staff**

432. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on progress in relation to the issue of school secretaries and caretaker's terms and conditions; when it is expected that a final resolution will be reached; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9238/22]

**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 later this week, following reflection on the matters discussed at that meeting.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on working terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan is in place for schools and for the Department, similar engagement, on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers, will begin.

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

### **Special Educational Needs**

433. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education the criteria used by the HSE to refer persons to the Middletown Centre for Autism, Middletown, Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9244/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Middletown Centre for Autism project is a jointly funded initiative between the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the Department of Education aimed at supporting the promotion of excellence in the development and harmonisation of education and allied services to children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders.

At the request of my Department, and, as approved by the North South Ministerial Council, Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) commenced provision, on a limited basis in the Republic of Ireland of an intensive educational assessment and learning support service to children and young people on an outreach basis (MCA Pilot). This is a second-tier service which complements existing provision for children and young people with autism. Therefore, where autistic children and young people experience significant difficulties, the first course of action is engagement with first tier services provided by the Department of Education, (including NEPS), National Council for Special Education and Health Services Executive and (HSE)/HSE funded services.

The MCA Pilot is a second-tier service and works with a defined number of referrals. The nomination and referral process is initiated by parents and professionals at school level via the Principal following a multidisciplinary school based review involving the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the local Special Educational Needs Officer (SENO) and other

relevant professionals. Nominations cannot be made directly to Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA), the Department of Education or the NCSE.

Nominations for MCA Referral are only considered for children and young people where such a review concludes despite comprehensive autism specific support and consistent engagement from school and home with first-tier services, the child or young person continues to present with significant and enduring behavioural and emotional concerns which impact their engagement and participation in education. MCA's Learning Support & Assessment team builds on the work of first tier services and works alongside them to ensure their involvement in the process. They aim to create a strong base for building family and professional capacity to support the child when the referral concludes (normally after 10 months).

The Centre provides a comprehensive nationwide training service for parents and educational professionals. Parents can view the range of courses which the Centre has available through the website, [www.middletownautism.com](http://www.middletownautism.com).

### **Departmental Staff**

434. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education the total number of officials who are currently assigned to her Department; the number of officials that have been transferred from her Department to the Department of Further and Higher Education since its establishment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9254/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** There are currently 1504\* officials assigned to this Department. Following the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in August 2020, 122 officials transferred on foot of the transfer of further and higher education functions from the Department of Education

\* Denotes headcount numbers excluding temporary staff

### **Educational Disadvantage**

435. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she has plans to extend DEIS status to new schools; if so, the scale of the planned extension; and the manner in which new schools will be chosen. [9256/22]

**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 identification 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.

### **Educational Disadvantage**

436. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she has assessed the disadvantage status of a school (details supplied) which was one of the schools selected from among those not in the DEIS scheme for inclusion in the expansion of the free school meals; and if the school was close to being placed on the same scale as schools which now have disadvantaged status. [9257/22]

**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 identification 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.

### **Special Educational Needs**

437. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the widespread concerns and questions (details supplied) among school principals, parents, SNAs and other stakeholders regarding practical elements of the allocation of special needs assistants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9264/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

The allocation of 1,165 SNAs announced in Budget 2022 is to meet the care needs of pupils in 2022 and will enable the establishment of new special classes, creation of new places in special schools, support children in mainstream classes for the 2022/23 school year. Provision for

19,169 SNAs as at 31st December 2022 will represent an increase of 81% since 2011 at which time 10,575 were provided.

Where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website: [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools)

All stakeholders will be advised when the SNA allocation process has been completed and this will be done in line with previous years in May.

Your query has also been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

### Teaching Qualifications

438. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education the plans regarding SNAs in relation to minimum qualification criteria have being increased from the current requirement of three Ds in the junior certificate; the date from which the new requirement will be set; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9268/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department

does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

### **School Facilities**

439. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the submission of a planning application for two autism spectrum disorder classrooms in a school (details supplied). [9300/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In April 2019 grant approval was given to build a four-Classroom ASD Base at Skerries Educate Together National School under the Additional Accommodation scheme for 2019. Given the large scale of the project the Department sought the involvement of Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB) to assist the school with the appointment of a design team.

In January 2020, DDLETB contacted the Department and confirmed that it could no longer assist with this project and a design team had not been procured up to this point. The Department then requested Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMLETB) to take over the role of procuring for the Design Team. LMLETB agreed, and through its involvement, a design team was appointed in September 2020.

To meet the school's immediate needs further grant approval was given in February 2021 for the school to rent a temporary accommodation unit while the project progresses. The school submitted a stage report in November 2021. This is currently under review by my Department's Technical Team. A full report will issue to the School Authorities when this review is complete and the school should engage with its Design Team regarding progression of the project at that point.

At present it is too early in the process to provide a timeline for completion of the project.

### **School Funding**

440. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider the request from a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9316/22]

**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.

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. 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. 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. As noted in Circular Letter 0065/2021 “**Enhanced Minor Works Grant Funding for Primary Schools Exceptional Minor Works Grant Funding for Post Primary Schools with a particular focus on supporting enhanced ventilation**” Scoil Mhuire Shankill may apply for additional funding through the Emergency Works Scheme, which is available at [gov.ie/en/circular/97829-emergency-works-grant-scheme-migration-to-on-line-applications-and-minor-revisions-of-scheme/](http://gov.ie/en/circular/97829-emergency-works-grant-scheme-migration-to-on-line-applications-and-minor-revisions-of-scheme/)

Scoil Mhuire, Shankill received an original allocation of 9 CO2 monitors in 2021. The school were also approved for an additional 6 CO2 monitors by email on the 19th of January 2022. This brings their total allocation to 15 CO2 monitors, which exceeds the number of classrooms in the school by one unit, which can be used at their discretion in an auxiliary room.

The public health guidance for schools operating during Covid-19 includes some important general recommendations about ventilation practices in schools.

Schools are urged to:

- Consider if room ventilation especially in classrooms, break rooms and canteens can be improved without causing discomfort.
- Ensure that, wherever possible, doors and windows are open to increase natural ventilation.
- Increase air flow and ventilation weather permitting

The over-arching approach for schools should be to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use.

It is worth noting that windows do not need to be open as wide in windy/colder weather in order to achieve the same level of airflow into the classroom. Opening windows fully for a short period at the end of each school day avoids the need to do the same again before the start of classes in the morning and further assists in managing comfort levels in the classroom in the mornings (partially opened windows should enable good ventilation to be achieved when classrooms are occupied). This will assist in managing comfort levels and also heating costs during periods of colder weather.

It may also be of assistance to know that the 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).

*Question No. 441 answered with Question No. 421.*

### **Special Educational Needs**

442. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education her plans to announce the SNA allocation for the academic year beginning September 2022 before May 2022; if her Department is considering a mechanism to apply for additional resources in the middle of the academic year in circumstances in which a school takes in students with additional levels of need; if the National Council for Special Education is resourced adequately to deal with exceptional reviews in a timely fashion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9333/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post -primary schools was deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations, the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year were announced:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 were maintained and automatically rolled over into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school received an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the 2021/22 school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration was given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year. In particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools were prioritised with determinations made before 30 June. Other applications were processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website, [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools). The NCSE published SNA allocations on their website, [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Circular 0029/2021 advised schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 were extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circular 0029/2021 and Circular 0030/2020 are available on the Department's website.

### **Departmental Data**

443. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education the number of children in primary level education in Dublin 1, 2, 4, 6 and 6W; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9346/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The requested information is set out in the table.

Academic Year	Post Code	Enrolment in Mainstream Schools	Enrolment in Special Schools	Total
2020-2021	D1	1933	192	2125
2020-2021	D2	306	99	405
2020-2021	D4	2762	76	2838
2020-2021	D6	2789	60	2849
2020-2021	D6W	3458	19	3477
	Total	11248	446	11694

Note: Figures are taken from the Primary Online Database and are for those pupils enrolled in schools located in Dublin 1, 2, 4, 6 & 6W for the academic year 2020-2021, the last year we have final enrolment figures for.

### School Facilities

444. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education when funding will be approved for an ASD unit at a school (details supplied) in County Tipperary; the reason for the delays in finalising the funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9393/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that the school to which the Deputy refers to was approved funding under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme to build a 2-classroom SEN Base.

I can confirm that my Department has received a Stage 1/2A report from the school. This report is currently being reviewed by officials in my Department. A decision will be conveyed to the school authority as soon as this review has been completed.

### Food Safety

445. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the steps being taken to form and implement a coherent training programme for teachers in preschools, primary and secondary schools to care for children with life-threatening food allergies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9400/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Board of Management of each school is responsible for the care and safety of all pupils. It is important that the school management authority requests parents to ensure that the school is made aware of any medical condition suffered by any pupils attending. Where the school is aware of potential difficulties that may arise as a consequence of a medical condition suffered by one or more pupils, it may be possible for the management authorities, working in conjunction with parents, teachers and children to put preventative measures in place to lessen the possibility of any difficulties arising or to ensure that, if a pupil suffers from an illness requiring, for example, the administration of medication, that appropriate treatment is available.

The administration of medicines in primary schools is the subject of an agreement between the Irish National Teachers Organisation and the organisation representing school management at primary level. While this agreement specifies that no teacher can be required to administer medicine or drugs to pupils, it also sets out procedures that must be followed where a teacher or teachers agree to do so. The position is that either the parents of the child should make themselves available to administer medication as required, or where they wish the staff in the school to administer it, they should indemnify the school.

My Department cannot direct any member of the Board of Management or the teaching staff of the school to administer medical treatment to pupils, action and procedures which are normally carried out by medical professionals such as doctors and nurses.

Where a child requires adult assistance to assist in the administration of medicine and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time, SNA support may be allocated for this purpose.

It is a matter for the Board of Management to ensure that SNAs are in a position to effectively meet the care needs of pupils for whom SNA support has been allocated in the school, when appointing an SNA.

Where specific training is required to meet the needs of an individual pupil, it is recommended that the school liaise with child's parents to obtain the necessary guidance and training to enable the SNA to meet the care needs of the pupil in an appropriate manner. It is a matter for individual school authorities to make such arrangements locally.

Early years services are also required to have a Policy on the Administration of Medication which should include details of procedures to be followed in a medical emergency, including an allergic reaction.

### **Schools Building Projects**

446. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the status of a project (details supplied); the level of Government engagement with the project; her plans for the continuity of Irish medium education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9401/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The provision of Irish-medium education is a priority for my Department and this Government, and we share a strong commitment to increasing the number of Irish-medium places available and providing suitable accommodation in this regard.

As the Deputy may be aware, in early 2021 I approved a proposal for a new satellite model of Irish-medium post-primary provision to be piloted in Dundalk. The model involves a satellite/Dundalk-based campus of An Foras Pátrúnachta's Balbriggan Gaelcholáiste – Coláiste Ghlór na Mara.

This pilot offers parents in Dundalk a new choice for Irish-medium provision, in addition to existing provision provided by schools in the area. The learning from the pilot may assist in the potential development of an enduring policy/approach for the application of this model elsewhere, subject to successful review.

The patron of Coláiste Ghlór na Mara deferred the opening of the Dundalk campus from September 2021 to September 2022. Putting in place the necessary accommodation arrangements for September 2022 has been devolved to the school patron.

The Department is also continuing to support the existing Aonad at Coláiste Chú Chulainn to ensure continuity of provision for the students enrolled.

### Education Policy

447. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education her plans for primary education in County Louth; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9402/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that in order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System (GIS), using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit and school enrolment data, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise and where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level.

The most recent analysis undertaken by my Department projects that over 76% of the 314 school planning areas at primary level have stable or decreasing projected enrolments for the period to 2025, whereas some 88% of the school planning areas at post-primary level are anticipated to have increased enrolments for the period to 2028, with most expected to reach a peak in the next two or three years.

The level of demand volume across school planning areas with an increasing net requirement ranges from small to medium increases that are likely to be accommodated by existing schools through to significant projected growth that may require additional provision.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

The following projects are included for Capital funding on my Department's School Building Programme:

01554B- Baile an Phusta NS Ardee. Project ON SITE to provide new 6 C/R extension to include retention and refurbishment of existing 6 C/R School.

18936K-St Itas Special School, Drogheda Project at STAGE 1( Preliminary Design) to provide 20 Classrooms Special School – Campus Project with St Marys Special School.

19214A-St Marys Special School, Drogheda, Project at STAGE 1 to provide 17 Classroom Special School – Campus Project with St Ita's Special School (RN 18936K).

19215C-SN Ard Mhuire, Marymount. Project at STAGE 2b (Detailed Design) to provide a 24 Classroom school(co-ed fully vertical).

20171P-Ardee ETNS. Project at STAGE 3 (Tender Stage) to provide an 8 Classroom School with 2 SEN Base.

20259G-St Francis NS, Blackrock. PROJECT BRIEF STAGE. Project is to expand school to provide an 8 C/R extension plus 2 SEN Base to an existing 8 C/R school delivered in 2013.

Details of projects ongoing or recently completed are updated regularly on my Department's website, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review in the context of available information on population, enrolments, existing school capacity and residential development activity. Additionally, my Department will continue to liaise with Louth County Council in respect of their Development Plans with a view to identifying any potential long-term school accommodation requirements across the county.

### **Education Policy**

448. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education her plans for secondary education in County Louth; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9403/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that in order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System (GIS), using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit and school enrolment data, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise and where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level.

The most recent analysis undertaken by my Department projects that over 76% of the 314 school planning areas at primary level have stable or decreasing projected enrolments for the period to 2025, whereas some 88% of the school planning areas at post-primary level are anticipated to have increased enrolments for the period to 2028, with most expected to reach a peak in the next two or three years.

The level of demand volume across school planning areas with an increasing net requirement ranges from small to medium increases that are likely to be accommodated by existing schools through to significant projected growth that may require additional provision.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

As the Deputy may be aware, since April 2018 the Government has announced 47 new schools to be established over a four year period (2019 - 2022) including one new post primary school (1,000 pupils) to serve the Laytown and Drogheda school planning areas (Regional Solution). This school was established in 2019 under the patronage of Educate Together.

I can confirm contracts for sale have now been signed, conditional on the landowner providing required infrastructure upgrades to serve the site. My Department has been advised that these infrastructure upgrades are programmed to be completed by the end of July 2022. The location of the permanent site (circa 11 acres in size) will incorporate the current temporary site at Mill Road, Drogheda at which the school is located.

The school building project will be delivered under my Department's Design and Build programme. The project will proceed into early architectural planning which involves site surveys,

school design stages and the preparation of statutory applications. A pre planning meeting will be arranged with the local authority in advance of preparing a Planning Application. Once statutory approvals have been secured, the project will proceed to tender and construction stages.

The following extension projects are also included for Capital funding under the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA):

St Mary's Diocesan School, Sacred Heart Secondary School, De La Salle College, St Vincent's Secondary School, St Oliver's Community College and Ardee Community School. Details of projects ongoing or recently completed are updated regularly on my Department's website, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie), or [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review in the context of available information on population, enrolments, existing school capacity and residential development activity. Additionally, my Department will continue to liaise with Louth County Council in respect of their Development Plans with a view to identifying any potential long-term school accommodation requirements across the county.

### **Energy Prices**

449. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education the current energy costs for schools across the State. [9408/22]

**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.

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.

Schools that are designed and built in accordance with the Department's schools technical guidance documents have been achieving A3 Building Energy Ratings since 2009 with current schools typically achieving up to 20% higher 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. The Department's policy is supported by a strong research programme with fifty three research projects at various stages including the energy website, [www.energyineducation.ie](http://www.energyineducation.ie), which is a joint partnership with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI).

In the interest of sustainability, it is critical that renewable applications are properly suited to the schools needs so as to reduce energy costs and carbon and not just applied for the sake of having renewables. It is also critical that we minimise the demand for energy before we invest in renewable energy applications. This has been assisted in previous years with the wall and attic insulation programme and the water conservation programme.

My Department and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications established a jointly funded pathfinder programme with the SEAI, testing and demonstrating energy

efficiency and decarbonisation retrofit approaches. This pathfinder is a great example of collaboration ensuring the deployment of new design approaches and technologies are introduced to the educational environment on an evidence based approach.

This Pathfinder programme is paving the way for, and informing, a much larger national schools' programme for the energy retrofit of schools built prior to 2008 as included in the National Development Plan. It is facilitating research on a range of typical retrofit options, which will have been tried and tested. It is providing valuable development information for a solution driven delivery strategy which will be founded on a solid evidence base that has proven the robustness and scalability of renewable solutions within the schools' sector.

The longer-term outcome of the pathfinder will be to create an accurate and scalable model for energy efficient retrofits of schools across Ireland. The deep energy retrofit programme for schools built prior to 2008 is due to be rolled out as included in the National Development Plan.

The pathfinder programme has retrofitted 41 schools across Ireland to date with work on an additional 9 schools added in 2021 underway. 2022 sees six additional schools undergoing deep retrofit to a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B with renewable heating systems. Each school undergoes a comprehensive assessment to ensure that the measures are suitable for that school and will deliver value to both the school and learnings for the national retrofit programme.

The Energy in Education website portal and advice programme (Joint programme between SEAI and Dept. of Education) also assists schools reduce their energy consumption and empowers participating schools and pupils to learn the benefits of sustainability. [www.energyin-education.ie](http://www.energyin-education.ie). Typically savings of between 5 to 10% are identified through low and no cost measures, while some schools participating have identified potential savings of up to 15 % or more.

Furthermore 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.

The SEAI Annual Report 2021 on Public Sector Energy Efficiency Performance published this month notes reporting compliance for schools for 2020 was 76% and the total energy spend of schools and ETBs that reported was €34 Million, this represents approximately 6% of total public sector energy consumption reported.

My Department has also 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).

### **Schools Building Projects**

**450. Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the proposed, permanent new building for a school (details supplied); the timeframe for the completion of the proposed extension for the school approved under the additional school accommodation scheme in 2021; if the works will, as proposed, include a sensory garden and a new SEN unit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9411/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware, respon-

sibility for delivering the project in question has been devolved to Dublin & Dún Laoghaire Education & Training Board (DDLETB). The Department of Education originally approved the construction of a stand-alone extension of just over 4,000m<sup>2</sup> in area to include a 2-classroom SEN Base. Some works to the existing building were also included in this approval.

A number of significant issues have unfortunately arisen, including delays in obtaining statutory consents from the local authority and delays to the finalisation of the detailed design process for the project, as it was originally approved.

Based on a report provided by DDLETB, it was agreed following a meeting between my Department and DDLETB that the project should be redesigned.

My Department is currently in the process of reviewing next steps in the progression of the project but it is anticipated that DDLETB will shortly be approved to proceed with the appointment of a Design Team to progress the redesign of the buildings, obtain the necessary statutory planning permissions and move the project onward to construction in due course.

As the project is at an early stage in the delivery process, it is not possible at this time to give a date for completion.

Pending completion of the main building project, the Department has approved the provision of a Home Economics Room, an Art Room, and a Toilet Block. through the Department's Framework of Modular Accommodation Providers. This project is currently underway and will be in situ for September 2022. The school has put contingency arrangements in place to make best use of existing accommodation until the modular accommodation is ready to be occupied.

### **Special Educational Needs**

451. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that her Department's new model of SNA allocation to schools has still not been rolled out fully and that principals have been advised to wait and see what allocation they receive in May 2022 and then apply for an exceptional review; when the new mode; of allocation will be rolled out; the actions she is taking to address these issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9413/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

Where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website, [ncse.ie/for-schools](https://www.ncse.ie/for-schools).

All stakeholders will be advised when the SNA allocation process has been completed and this will be done in line with previous years in May.

### **Public Sector Pensions**

452. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education if a pension will be provided to school secretaries such as in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9414/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries 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. 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. 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 additionally offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions. These offers are subject to agreement on all elements of the claim. Engagement is continuing, with the aim of reaching an overall agreement: the most recent formal talks took place at a meeting at the WRC on 26 January, and the parties are to meet again later this week, following reflection on the matters discussed at that meeting.

Public servant status and the associated access to a public service pension scheme is not a part of the current offer. As previously set out in the joint statement following the WRC engagement in May 2021, the final element of the claim in respect of public service status is acknowledged by all parties to be more complex and will require more detailed analysis and consideration following the conclusion of current discussions.

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

### **Special Educational Needs**

453. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education the number of places that are available for children with ASD in a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9435/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Deputy will be aware that this school opened for the 2021/22 school year in response to the significant demand for special school places in the local area.

The current capacity of the school is for 36 students with the majority of students now attending. Arrangements are in place for the remaining students to be transitioned into the school now that the recruitment of staff has been completed. A further increase in enrolment is planned for the 2022/2023 school year, following completion of the necessary building works.

22 February 2022

My Department and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) are working to increase the enrolment capacity in special schools. Throughout 2020 and 2021 the Department and the NCSE have worked closely on a more streamlined and joined up planning process which has ensured a targeted approach to meet demand for special education placements ahead of each new school-year.

This approach is delivering with the number of special education teachers, special needs assistants and special class and school places at unprecedented levels.

I would like to reassure the Deputy that the local SENOs continue to be available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: [ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list](http://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list).

### Oideachas Gaeltachta

454. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais líon na mBunscoileanna Gaeltachta atá aitheanta faoin bPolasaí Oideachais Gaeltachta; an líon múinteoirí ranga atá i ngach scoil acu, briste síos de réir contae; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [9439/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Tá liosta de bhunscoileanna, de réir contae, atá lonnaithe i limistéir pleanála teanga Ghaeltachta, le líon na múinteoirí ranga, ar fáil sa tábla EXCEL faoi iamh.

Tá 105 (80%) de na 132 bunscoil sa Ghaeltacht ag glacadh páirt sa Scéim Aitheantais Scoileanna Gaeltachta ó 2017 ar aghaidh agus tá na bunscoileanna seo ar an aistear chun na critéir theangabhunaithe faoin Scéim a chomhlíonadh d'fhonn cáilíocht an oideachais trí mheán na Gaeilge a threisiú.

Tá acmhainní breise curtha ar fáil do na bunscoileanna atá rannpháirteach sa Scéim Aitheantais, lena n-áirítear uaireanta tacaíochta teanga don Ghaeilge, chun tacú lena rannpháirtíocht ghníomhach sa Scéim chun na critéir theangabhunaithe a chomhlíonadh.

Tugtar deiseanna ar bhonn bliantúil do na 27 bunscoil eile i limistéir pleanála teanga Ghaeltachta nach bhfuil páirteach sa Scéim cheana féin páirt a ghlacadh tar éis dul i gcomhairle lena bpobal scoile áitiúil.

Tá an Scéim seo mar cheann de phríomhghníomhartha an Pholasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta 2017-2022.

#### **Question:**

**To ask the Minister for Education the number of Gaeltacht primary schools recognised under the Policy on Gaeltacht Education; the number of classroom teachers in each school, broken down by county; and whether she will make a statement on the matter.**

A list of primary schools by county located in Gaeltacht language-planning areas, with numbers of class teachers, is available in the attached EXCEL table.

105 (80%) of the 132 primary schools in the Gaeltacht have been participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme since 2017 and these primary schools are on the journey to meet the language-based criteria under the Scheme in order to strengthen the quality of Irish-medium education.

Additional resources have been made available to primary schools participating in the Recognition Scheme, including language support hours for Irish, to support their active participation in the Scheme in meeting the language-based criteria.

The remaining 27 primary schools in Gaeltacht language-planning areas that are not already participating in the Scheme are given opportunities on an annual basis to participate following consultation with their local school community.

The Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme is one of the key actions of the Policy for Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022.

[<a ref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\_pq454-22-02-22\_en.xlsx">Bunscoileanna</a>]

### **Education Welfare Service**

455. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if the necessity for schools to make reports under the Education Welfare Act 2000 due to the absence of a student from school is still required in cases in which those absences were caused as a result of Covid-19 and the need to isolate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9490/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has provided guidance to schools in relation to the recording and reporting of COVID-19 related absences. COVID-19 related absences arising from students who have been requested to self-isolate by a medical professional or for students who feel unwell with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 must be recorded in accordance with the school’s normal procedures for the notification and recording of absences. However these COVID-19 related absences should be noted by the school as explained absences.

Notwithstanding the current COVID-19 related environment that schools are now operating in, the statutory requirements for reporting pupil absenteeism will continue as normal. In this respect the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 requires the principal of a recognised school to maintain records of the attendance or non-attendance on each school day of each student enrolled in that school which is reported to Tusla.

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) receives notifications of all absences from school in line with the provisions of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. TESS is very aware that some students will be absent for Covid-19-related reasons. Absences are reported to TESS as explained and unexplained, and together they make up the cumulative number of days marked absent. This has remained the reporting requirement throughout COVID-19 pandemic.

Daily school attendance data is collected and held at local school level and collected by Tusla at the aggregated level through the Annual Attendance Report (AAR) and, also at the student level through the Student Absence Report (SAR). Any child who misses 20 school days must be reported to Tusla by law, however this may not result in any intervention, particularly if the absences are explained. Where schools have a concern about a child’s attendance they are required to make a referral to TESS Education Welfare Service. TESS views all school attendance referrals from a child welfare perspective with the intention of finding solutions that will enable and support students to attend, participate and be retained in education.

### **Schools Building Projects**

456. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if funding will be made available for the repair and replacement of five prefab buildings at a school (details supplied); and if a timeline for such works will be provided. [9561/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy, that my Department has no current record of receiving an application for additional accommodation for St. Ronan's National School, Deansrath, Clondalkin, Dublin 22.

It is open to the school authority to make an application for additional accommodation through the 'Additional School Accommodation scheme (ASA)', details of which are available at [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

I can confirm that my officials have been in touch with the school to provide the application forms required to make an application for such funding.

### Site Acquisitions

457. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if a site designated for educational purposes as part of the new housing development of Kilcarbery, County Dublin is no longer required for such purposes; the rationale for this decision; if this decision is linked to the potential planned expansion of a school (details supplied); if so, if this expansion will be sufficient to meet the educational needs of the increased local population at Kilcarbery; and the timeline envisaged for such an expansion. [9562/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As part of the planning for the new housing development at Kilcarbery, a site was identified in order to provide for a potential future school in the area.

As the Deputy may be aware, following a review of demographic requirements and planned residential development, including that planned at Kilcarbery, a new primary school for the Clondalkin\_D22 school planning area was announced in 2018. The proposed location for the school is a suitable Minister-owned site which is very close to the development. The school is not established yet as planned residential development has not proceeded at the pace anticipated. The situation is being kept under review and a decision on the timing of the establishment of this school will be made based on demographic requirements.

Requirements for additional education provision generally in the area also continue to be kept under review, as is the case in all school planning areas across the country.

The potential planned expansion of the school to which the Deputy refers is not linked to the new development at Kilcarbery though the capacity of all existing schools is included in my Department's consideration of school accommodation needs.

### School Accommodation

458. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the contingency plan for a school (details supplied) in relation to alternative temporary accommodation for the beginning of the new school term in August 2022. [9563/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is engaged in discussions in respect of educational facilities in Galway City which can potentially provide school accommodation for the school to which the Deputy refers for the next two school years from

September 2022.

We are currently awaiting confirmation that this may be possible and are expecting to hear word in relation to same in the coming weeks. These discussions are at a sensitive stage.

### **Schools Building Projects**

459. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of the progress of securing a permanent building for a school (details supplied); if discussions between her Department and Galway City and County Councils in relation to the acquisition of a permanent site have progressed; when it is expected that this school will be located on its permanent site and in its permanent building; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9564/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department have been working closely with both Galway City Council and Galway County Council to identify and acquire a Permanent Site for the Galway Educate Together Secondary School under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding.

To date, following extensive site identification and assessment exercises, a number of permanent site options have been identified in both the East of the City and the County. Each of these site options were investigated by my Department in conjunction with officials from the Local Authorities. Unfortunately in the case of all options investigated so far, either the land could not be acquired from the landowner or the site was ultimately considered unfeasible to develop in the short term.

However, a couple of permanent site options have been identified that could be delivered in the medium term and officials in my Department are working closely with the respective Local Authorities to explore the deliverability of school facilities on these sites in the shortest possible timeframe.

In relation to the acquisition of permanent sites and as the Deputy will appreciate, the site acquisition process is very complex and subject to completion of successful negotiation and many conveyancing processes. Each acquisition is also very unique and dependant on multiple factors many which ## may be outside of the control of my Department. The Deputy will also appreciate the importance of conducting a thorough appraisal of site options before proceeding with an acquisition in order to obtain best value for the Exchequer. In this regard, it is not possible to give a specific timeframe for the completion of a permanent site acquisition.

### **Departmental Advertising**

460. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education the amount her Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9571/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department has not engaged in any advertising or features with the magazine referenced.

### **Special Educational Needs**

461. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education when she will ensure that there are ASD units in primary schools in Clonmel, the largest town in county Tipperary. [9589/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is very cognisant of special education needs (SEN) accommodation requirements across the country including the Clonmel school planning area. My Department generally includes a SEN Base in all new schools, as well as replacement school buildings and extensions. My Department also funds the provision of additional accommodation, or the reconfiguration of existing accommodation, where a new special class is sanctioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE).

The NCSE has a statutory function to plan and co-ordinate the provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs, in consultation with the relevant education partners and the Health Service Executive. This includes the establishment of special class and special school placements in various geographical areas where there is an identified need.

In deciding where to establish a special class in an area, the NCSE takes account of the current and projected demand and the available school accommodation both current and planned. The Council ensures that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements. When the NCSE sanction a special class in a school, the school can apply to my Department for capital funding to accommodate the class under the Additional School Accommodation scheme.

My Department has no current applications on hand for SEN class accommodation from the school planning area in question. There are currently 6 special educational needs (SEN) classes in the Clonmel school planning area.

### **School Staff**

462. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the status of discussions with school secretaries regarding pensions, conditions and pay equality; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9645/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries 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 later this week, 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.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

463. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Education when the long-promised fibre optic broadband service will be provided for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9660/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The delivery of high quality internet connectivity for all schools is a key objective of my Department. It is accepted that good connectivity is essential to ensure that schools are facilitated to progress the embedding of digital technologies in teaching and learning and for the implementation of new and revised curriculum.

My Department operates the Schools Broadband Programme at an annual cost of some €13m, providing broadband connectivity to schools through a range of technologies at the best available connectivity based on local infrastructure. The school referred to by the Deputy is currently on 12 Mb wireless broadband connection, which is a dedicated service to the school.

The school was included in a recent tender to put in place a new contract for broadband services and was awarded to a provider of high speed broadband. That provider has advised that work is continuing on the installation of the service to the school, with the pre-installation works now completed. The provider will be in contact with the school directly in due course to organise the final connection in the school.

As the Deputy will be aware the Department is obliged to adhere to procurement regulations, and must engage with the selected providers on the DES Framework of Providers of Broadband Services through a tender process to award services. This is the basis on which all state-funding is utilised to ensure transparency and equal treatment for all schools and providers, and adherence to regulatory requirements.

### **School Curriculum**

464. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education her plans to extend the uptake of computer science as a leaving certificate option in as many schools as possible; if there is a team working on developing requirements in terms of equipment and the upskilling of staff needed to deliver same; the extent to which Ireland's base of leading-edge information and communications technology companies are playing a role in the planning and delivery of these ambitions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9666/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The new subject of Leaving Certificate Computer Science (LCCS) was introduced on a phased basis to 40 schools in September 2018. From September 2020, LCCS was available to schools nationally as a full optional subject. The numbers of schools offering the subject is growing. There are currently approximately 145 schools across the country offering this subject to their students.

The approach to the provision of the subject by schools has been informed by the valuable

learning gathered from the phased introduction of the subject since September 2018.

Uniquely, this also included a Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) Discover funded research project to track the development of progress of teachers of the subject during the first two years of the subject rollout. A Department led group was formed to assist in, and have oversight of, this research study and its findings.

The introduction of this new subject to schools is supported by a Leaving Certificate Computer Science Support Framework. This framework represents a collaboration between the Department of Education, IBEC, the Computers in Education Society of Ireland (CESI), the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), higher education institutions, Ibec, the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and SOLAS.

The framework puts in place key actions to promote a broad take-up of the subject at both ordinary and higher level. There is a focus on actions to support greater female participation and greater participation amongst students who would not have traditionally considered subjects like Computer Science for the Leaving Certificate.

For schools who are considering the introduction of LCCS onto their curriculum an “Expression of Interest” process is currently being carried out by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) to ascertain teachers’ professional learning needs so as to support the effective delivery of the new subject in schools.

My Department has issued over €250m under the ICT grant directly to schools since 2016, which underpins the implementation of the embedding of digital technologies in all classroom and school activity, and supports the building of digital skills in the student population. As outlined in the circulars accompanying this grant, this funding can assist schools in the implementation of STEM subjects, of new and revised subject specifications at Junior and Senior Cycle, and the changes to the primary curriculum, where the use of digital technologies enables the delivery of same.

Partnership with business and industry in sustaining the growth of Computer Science is central to the operation of this Framework. Business and industry can contribute to enhancing opportunities for students to access high-quality information and experience in relation to careers in Computer Science. These take the form of school visits by relevant personnel, input to careers evenings, participation in co-curricular and extracurricular events. Engagement of business and industry representatives with teachers of computer science through buddy systems, teacher internships etc. will also be hugely important.

All of these supports have been designed to ensure there is capacity within the system for long-term, sustainable growth of Leaving Certificate Computer Science.

### **State Examinations**

465. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education if she will act to ensure that a student (details supplied) receives their State examinations certificate of completion of junior certificate for 2020 from their school. [9731/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy will be aware, the former Minister for Education and Skills announced in April 2020 that the Junior Cycle examinations, scheduled for June 2020, would be cancelled due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In lieu of examinations, revised arrangements were announced whereby the work and achieve-

ment of third year students would be recognised with (i) a written report from their school on their learning achievements in each subject, short course and/or priority learning unit and (ii) a state certificate of completion from the Department of Education.

The Junior Cycle Certificates of Completion were issued to schools for all Junior Cycle third year students for the year 2020 on Thursday 13th May 2021. Schools were asked to check, download and distribute the certificates to their own students. The deadline for schools to make changes was 21st June 2021 and the deadline for schools to download the certificates was 24th June 2021.

As the Certificates of Completion were processed and distributed through the schools, my Department advises to contact the school in the first instance when looking for a copy of the certificate.

Officials from my Department have been in touch with the parties in question and I understand the matter has been resolved.

### **Special Educational Needs**

466. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if the decision to close the early intervention class in a school (details supplied) will be reversed. [9732/22]

467. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the reason for the phasing out of early intervention ASD classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9733/22]

468. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the details of her meetings with student organisations, school children parents' organisations, teachers' unions, unions representing other school staff and disability organisations concerning the phasing out early intervention classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9734/22]

469. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide the list of each national school in which early intervention ASD classes have been closed or are scheduled to be closed since 1 January 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9735/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 466 to 469, inclusive, together.

Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

This year, my Department will spend in excess of €2 Billion, or over 25% of the Department's budget on providing additional teaching and care supports for children with special educational needs.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children with special educational needs nationwide.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

Parents seeking special class placements for their children are advised to contact NCSE locally so that their needs can be taken into account for planning purposes.

It is important also to point out that the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme provides up to two years of preschool within the eligible age rate, without charge. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), introduced in 2016, enables the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities/additional needs in the ECCE Programme. The goal of AIM is to create a more inclusive environment in preschools, so all children, regardless of ability, can benefit from quality early learning and care. A diagnosis of autism (or other disabilities/additional needs) is not required to access AIM supports. However, preschool children with a diagnosis are generally supported in mainstream preschools with additional supports provided through AIM where required.

NCSE sanctions the establishment of special classes, including ASD Early Intervention (EI) classes where there is an identified need. I understand that, on occasion, EI classes are re-designated as school-age special classes to reflect the changing age-profile of students, the changing needs in an area and in order to ensure a continuation of support for students in the EI class who require a special class placement.

The school referenced by the Deputy currently has two ASD special classes and one Early Intervention class which opened in September 2020.

At that time, the school agreed that while the class would open as an Early Intervention ASD class, it would be re-designated as an additional primary ASD class from September 2022 to meet the projected demand for places in the area.

This additional special class would cater for the students enrolled in the Early Intervention class should they continue to require a special class place for their primary education at that time.

I also understand that earlier this month, the school engaged with the NCSE regarding the emerging need for the retention of the Early Intervention class in the school and requested that the class be retained.

This request is being considered by the NCSE as a matter of urgency and a meeting has been arranged with the school to review the level of need in the area and the capacity of the school to meet the need.

A decision will be made very quickly on the matter.

I can assure the Deputy that the NCSE will take account of the overall need in the area and the provision required to meet that need.

As referenced above, ASD EI classes are generally re-designated, not closed. The number of active ASD EI classes in each of the school years from 2015/2016 to date is detailed in the following table.

School Year	Early Intervention
2015/16	118
2016/17	127
2017/18	130
2018/19	129
2019/20	132
2020/21	135
2021/22	132

Both my Department and the NCSE are always grateful to schools who express a willing-

ness to open a special class to meet the educational needs of students in their local communities.

The local SENOs remain available to assist and advise parents of children with special educational needs.

Information on the location of EI classes is available on the NCSE website.

*Question No. 467 answered with Question No. 466.*

*Question No. 468 answered with Question No. 466.*

*Question No. 469 answered with Question No. 466.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

470. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to remove the mask mandate for children in national schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9736/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 17th February 2022, NPHE reviewed the remaining public health measures including the infection prevention control measures and restrictions in school settings. The Government has accepted the recommendations of the NPHE to remove remaining restrictions relating to mask-wearing and physical distancing in schools with effect from Monday 28th February.

While it will no longer be a requirement for staff or pupils to wear a mask in school, staff and pupils can continue to wear a mask if they wish to do so on a personal basis and schools should continue to make masks available on request to staff or pupils as they are currently doing.

### **Schools Building Projects**

471. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education the reason there is no secondary school for the three inner-city primary schools (details supplied); if this is due to the lack of a site; the process for these primary schools to secure a secondary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9739/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware, the schools to which he refers are in the Dublin\_8 school planning area, which has five post primary schools.

In general, parents exercise choice regarding which school to apply to and where the school has places, the pupil should be admitted.

However, in schools where there are more applicants than places available, a selection process may be necessary. This selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants. This may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice. The selection process, procedures and enrolment policy are the responsibility of the individual school authorities.

My Department has approved extension projects at two post primary schools in the Dublin\_8 school planning area, including additional provision for pupils with special education needs.

In addition Sandymount ETSS RN 68305F was established as a regional solution to service

Dublin 2, 4, 6 and 8. The school will ultimately cater for 1,000 pupils with an enrolment of 216 in 2021. Although outside the school planning area, the newly established Harold's Cross ETSS is proximate to the schools referenced and a project to deliver a 1,000 pupil building for this school is in train.

Overall, under Project Ireland 2040, the education sector will receive a total of approximately €4.4 billion capital investment over the period 2021-2025. This significant investment allows us to move forward with certainty on our ambitious plans and deliver high quality building projects, with a real focus on sustainability, for school communities across Ireland.

This investment will build on the good progress being made on adding capacity to cater for demographic changes and provision for children with special educational needs. This investment will also facilitate an increased focus on the modernisation of existing school stock and help transition the school system for an era of net zero carbon by 2050.

Approximately 1,200 school building projects are currently in progress across the various stages of planning, design, tender and construction – most of which are expected to be either under construction or completed in the period 2021 to 2025.

The current status of these projects being delivered is listed on a county by county basis on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) and is updated on a monthly basis to reflect their progress through the various stages.

### Departmental Data

472. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of students registered in 1st, 4th and 6th class across all primary schools in Ireland in 2021. [9759/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** We are not yet in a position to publish enrolments by standard for 2021. We will publish this detail along with the final enrolments for 2021-22 in June 2022.

Please find as follows requested information for academic year 2020-21 the last year we have such data available for.

2020		
Academic Year	Standard Description	Enrolment per Return
2020-2021	Junior Infants	63,427
2020-2021	Senior Infants	65,931
2020-2021	First Class	66,932
2020-2021	Second Class	67,359
2020-2021	Third Class	68,213
2020-2021	Fourth Class	70,930
2020-2021	Fifth Class	71,160
2020-2021	Sixth Class	71,541
	Grand Total	545,493

Note: Figures are taken from the Primary Online Database and are for mainstream pupils enrolled in a mainstream standard as of the Primary Census Date 30th September 2020.

### Site Acquisitions

473. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Education her plans for an interim site for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9770/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is engaged in discussions in respect of educational facilities in Galway City which can potentially provide school accommodation for the school to which the Deputy refers for the next two school years from September 2022.

We are currently awaiting confirmation that this may be possible and are expecting to hear word in relation to same in the coming weeks. These discussions are at a sensitive stage.

### **Schools Building Projects**

474. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if a letter of intent has been issued for a project in a school (details supplied); and if so, the details of same. [9778/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project referred to by the Deputy has reached commencement of the final contract award stage of the tender process. The assessment of tenders has concluded and the Letter of Intent (LOI) issued on the 15th February 2022 to the preferred tenderer.

This allows the preferred tenderer to put in place the Bond, Insurances, and confirmations of all legal arrangements required under the Contract.

Following receipt of all the necessary documentation, the Department will be in a position to issue the Letter of Acceptance (LOA), which will allow the contractor to mobilise on site.

My Department will advise the school authorities when the Letter of Acceptance issues. Once a Contractor has been appointed, my Department will keep the school informed of the construction programme underpinning the contract.

### **Schools Building Projects**

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Following receipt of all the necessary documentation, the Department will be in a position to issue the Letter of Acceptance (LOA), which will allow the contractor to mobilise on site.

My Department will advise the school authorities when the Letter of Acceptance issues. Once a Contractor has been appointed, my Department will keep the school informed of the construction programme underpinning the contract.

476. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education the steps being taken to increase the availability of multi or non-denominational secondary school places in Dublin 9 and 11; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9788/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware, my Department establishes and supports new schools where a demographic need for such a new school has been identified.

In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit and school enrolment data, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise and where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level.

Where demographic data indicates that additional provision is required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may, be provided through:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

A patronage process is run after it has been decided, based on demographic analysis, that a new school is required. The New Schools Establishment Group (NSEG) is an external independent advisory group which was set up in 2011 to advise the Minister on the patronage of new schools. The patronage process is open to all patron bodies and prospective patrons.

An Online Patronage Process System (OPPS) provides objective information to parents in the relevant school planning areas to assist them in making an informed choice about their preferred model of patronage and language of instruction for the new school. A prospective patron can choose the school(s) it wishes to apply for and complete an application form in that regard for each school, for submission to my Department. The Department provides details on the OPPS of the school(s) and the list of applicant patrons which have applied for patronage of the school(s). Parents access the OPPS website, which allows them to access the appropriate survey for their area, to input the details of the eligible child(ren) and to select their preferred patron and language of instruction (where applicable). Parental preferences from parents of children who reside in the school planning areas concerned, together with the extent of diversity currently available in these areas, are key to decisions in relation to the outcome of the process.

Following their consideration of my Department's assessment reports, the NSEG submits a report with recommendations to me for consideration and final decision. The assessment reports and the NSEG recommendations for all such patronage processes are made available on my Department's website, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie), or [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

There are a number of Capital projects planned or underway in Dublin 9 and 11 the following are in Multi or Inter-denominational schools. Rosmini Community School, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, whose ethos is Inter-Denominational, the project is currently at Stage 3 (tender action, evaluation and award) to provide a long-term enrolment for 350 pupils plus a 2 SEN Base. Additionally, there is a Major capital project for Clonturk Community College, Whitehall, Dublin 9, whose ethos is Multi-Denominational, to provide a long-term enrolment for 1,000 pupils plus 4 SEN Base which is currently at project brief stage (determining the project brief and schedules of accommodation). In the interim, capital funding has also been approved for the provision of Modular Accommodation for 12 general classrooms and 6 specialist classrooms.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review. Additionally, my Department will continue to liaise with the local authority in respect of its review of their Development Plan with a view to identifying any potential long-term school accommodation requirements in the areas of Dublin 9 and 11.

### **State Examinations**

477. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the detail of the way calculated grading was provided in 2021 for the 2,505 students who did not have junior certificate results for the purposes of standardisation. [9799/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded the Deputy's query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **School Accommodation**

478. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education the status of the provision of accommodation for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9810/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is engaged in discussions in respect of educational facilities in Galway City which can potentially provide school accommodation for the school to which the Deputy refers for the next two school years from September 2022.

We are currently awaiting confirmation that this may be possible and are expecting to hear word in relation to same in the coming weeks. These discussions are at a sensitive stage.

### **Schools Building Projects**

479. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education when a master plan will be completed for a school (details supplied) in County Mayo; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9817/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school referred to by the deputy has been approved funding under the Department's Additional School's Accommodation (ASA) Scheme.

Through close collaboration between the Department, the school and consultants engaged by the school to deliver this project, it has become clear that further works will be required and an overall master plan for these works is currently being worked through by Department officials. The school is being kept updated of all developments in this respect.

Interim measures are being put in place by the Department to address the most urgent issues of concern in the school ahead of the delivery of the permanent works. These measures are being implemented currently and the Department has been in regular contact with the school and its consultants to provide appropriate interim accommodation as expeditiously as possible.

### **School Staff**

480. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education her Department's approach to discussion at the Workplace Relations Commission on the pay and conditions for school secretaries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9818/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries 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 later this week, 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.

### **Public Services Provision**

481. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9829/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department of Education has had no involvement with the publication mentioned.

### **School Transport**

482. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education if school transport costs for a family (details supplied) will be capped to the overall family maximum is €650 in view of their situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9854/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant opera-

tion 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 Post Primary School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest post primary school/education centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that the family to whom the Deputy refers reside 6.5kms from their nearest post primary school and 15.7kms from the school they are attending. As this family is not attending their nearest school they are not eligible for school transport and are considered concessionary pupils.

Bus Eireann has advised that this family reside 1.9kms from the route of an existing scheduled public service. As this family is concessionary for school transport purposes they cannot be issued with School Transport Scheme tickets for use on public scheduled services.

### **School Facilities**

483. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education if she will ensure that the existing facilities of schools (details supplied) remain open in their current format until all the facilities of a new school are ready. [9859/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy, that my Department approved the amalgamation of the three post primary schools in question following an application from the schools' Patrons. It was also agreed that the amalgamated co-educational school would have a design capacity for up to 800 pupils.

My Department approved significant capital funding under the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA) for the construction of the required additional capacity. This additional accommodation encompasses provision for 6 additional mainstream classrooms, science, home economics, textiles, art, music, DCG, technology rooms, and staff room in addition to 4 classrooms for children with special educational needs. This project has been agreed by and devolved to the school authority for delivery.

At the request of the patrons, my Department agreed to the amalgamation taking effect from September 2022. Following subsequent engagement and again at the request of the school patrons, my Department has now agreed to extend the timeline for opening St Seton's Secondary School. The school patrons will use this time to engage in further planning and coordination with the school community before agreeing a new timeline for opening the school.

### **Teaching Qualifications**

484. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the situation of increasing the qualification required for the position of special needs assistants in schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9862/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with sig-

nificant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

### **Special Educational Needs**

485. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education if she will ensure that a SNA application by a school (details supplied) will be reconsidered as a matter of urgency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9868/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with spe-

cial educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically rollover into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website, [www.ncse.ie/for-schools](http://www.ncse.ie/for-schools)

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website, [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not included in this model of allocation and continue to be allocated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in the normal way.

Circular 0029/2021 has been published and advises schools of the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs for the 2021/22 school year.

Provisions set out in Circular 0030/2020 has been extended for the 2021/22 school year.

Circulars 29/2021 and 30/2020 are available on the Gov.ie website, [www.gov.ie/en/circulars/?organisation=department-of-education](http://www.gov.ie/en/circulars/?organisation=department-of-education)

Under this allocation model, the SNA allocation to a school can change from year to year as children with care needs leave the school, as new children with care needs enrol in a school and as children develop more independent living skills and their care needs diminish over time. There is a prescribed special class to SNA ratio.

ASD special classes have an allocation of 1 teacher and 2 SNA posts to cater for the educational and care needs of 6 students. Additional SNA support may also be sanctioned by the NCSE where there are individual children who have significant care needs which require support above the level of support already sanctioned to the school.

As the question relates to the allocation of supports by the NCSE, your correspondence has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

The NCSE have confirmed that an application for additional SNA support has been received from the school (as outlined in the details supplied) and that the SENO will be in contact with the school to arrange a visit after the mid-term break to progress the application.

### **Special Educational Needs**

486. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education her plans to increase further the number of SNAs for the coming year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9869/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Budget 2021 provided an additional 990 Special Needs Assistants.

This resulted in 18,004 SNAs having been allocated to schools by 31st December 2021

Budget 2022 provides funding for an additional 1,165 SNAs (in 2022) to provide support to children with special educational needs, which will bring the total number of SNAs to 19,169 at the end of December 2022.

Provision for 19,169 SNAs as at 31st December 2022 will represent an increase of 81% since 2011 at which time 10,575 were provided.

### **State Examinations**

487. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if a matter in relation to students (details supplied) that sat their leaving certificate in June 2020 and had to resit the exam in November 2020 will be addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9873/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

### **School Inspections**

488. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that there has still been no contact made between staff and the external support in the case of a school (details supplied); and if she will take action to ensure that the recommendations from the whole school evaluation are implemented urgently. [9874/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Inspectorate of my Department published a Whole-School Evaluation of Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) report, on 25 November 2021, following an inspection in the school to which the Deputy refers.

The Department publication, “A Guide to Inspection in Post-primary Schools” (2016) makes clear that following an inspection the board of management, as part of its agenda for school improvement, should discuss the findings and recommendations of each inspection report and should, along with the school principal, plan for and oversee the implementation of the actions needed to address the recommendations in inspection reports. The guide states that inspection reports along with other types of evidence gathered by the school should also be used by schools to inform their self-evaluation processes and their planning for improvement and development. The guide makes clear that while responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the recommendations and improvements in an inspection report rests mainly with the board and principal, the patron or trustees of a school also have a responsibility to ensure that effective follow-up action is taken. A school may wish to access the assistance available from the Department’s school support services or it may access advice and support from other bodies including its trustees or persons engaged by them.

The published inspection report to which the Deputy refers contains a commitment, in the form of a School Response on behalf of the Board of Management of the school, to address and fully implement all recommendations in the report. The Board stated that this would include seeking the direct assistance of the trustees of the school and accessing external facilitation.

The expectation is that the school’s Board of Management, the school’s trustees, the school’s leadership, the staff and all members of the wider school community will work together to achieve the full implementation of the recommendations for school improvement contained in the inspection report. Officials in my Department and the Inspectorate will continue follow-up engagements with this school to address the improvements required.

### **Legislative Measures**

489. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Education her plans to amend the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 for the duration of the pandemic in view of school absences necessitated by Covid-19 infection; and if not, the steps that her Department plans to take to assist parents of a symptomatic child or a child who is a close contact and has reached the minimum threshold for school absences. [9895/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has provided guidance to schools in relation to the recording and reporting of Covid-19 related absences. COVID-19 related absences arising from students who have been requested to self-isolate by a medical professional or for students who feel unwell with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 must be recorded in accordance with the school’s normal procedures for the notification and recording of absences. However these COVID-19 related absences should be noted by the school as explained absences.

The Education (Welfare) Act requires the principal of a recognised school to maintain records of the attendance or non-attendance on each school day of each student registered at that

school. Schools maintain a school register and a school roll. The purpose of the school register is to preserve a permanent record of the school history of each student. The purpose of the school roll is to record the daily and cumulative attendance of individual students.

In line with the provisions of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 a Principal of a recognised school is obliged to inform Tusla of a student's absence where the aggregate number of school days on which a student is absent from a recognised school during a school year is not less than 20 or where a student is, in the opinion of the principal of the recognised school at which he or she is enrolled, not attending school regularly. However, this may not result in any intervention in cases where the absences are explained. Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) is very aware that some students will be absent for Covid-19-related reasons. Absences are reported to TESS as explained and unexplained, and together they make up the cumulative number of days marked absent. This has remained the reporting requirement throughout COVID-19 pandemic.

### **School Attendance**

490. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Education if an increase in school absence reports under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 as a result of Covid-19 infection will divert resources from urgent reports on welfare grounds; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9896/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has provided guidance to schools in relation to the recording and reporting of COVID-19 related absences. COVID-19 related absences arising from students who have been requested to self-isolate by a medical professional or for students who feel unwell with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 must be recorded in accordance with the school's normal procedures for the notification and recording of absences. However these COVID-19 related absences should be noted by the school as explained absences.

Notwithstanding the current COVID-19 related environment that schools are now operating in, the statutory requirements for reporting student absenteeism will continue as normal. In this respect the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 requires the principal of a recognised school to maintain records of the attendance or non-attendance on each school day of each student registered at that school which is reported to Tusla.

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) receives notifications of all absences from school in line with the provisions of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. TESS is very aware that some students will be absent for Covid-19-related reasons. Absences are reported to TESS as explained and unexplained, and together they make up the cumulative number of days marked absent. This has remained the reporting requirement throughout COVID-19 pandemic.

Referrals are made to TESS on the basis of a concern in relation to school attendance. This is a separate process to school absence reporting. All referrals to TESS are screened and prioritised for intervention by an Educational Welfare Officer. An increase in school absenteeism due to explained absences will not impact on service delivery in respect of referrals to educational welfare service.

### **State Examinations**

491. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education when the date will be set for the 2022 junior certificate cookery exam; if the reason for the delay is that the State

Examinations Commission has been awaiting a final decision on the format of the junior certificate examinations from her Department; if a decision will be made and clarity given as soon as possible in view of the requirement for students to be able to plan and access school cooking facilities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9904/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

### **School Transport**

492. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Education when a decision will be made in the review case submitted by a school (details supplied) in respect of school transport under the primary school transport scheme submitted in October 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9905/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 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.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who have completed the application and payment process on time for the 2021/22 school year are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

My Department commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme in February 2021. The review is being conducted with a view to examining the current scheme, its broader effectiveness and sustainability, and to ensure that it serves students and their families adequately.

Following commencement of this review the Steering Group presented me with an initial interim report on eligibility with an examination of issues for mainstream pupils relating to the nearest and next nearest school. Following consideration of this report, I approved the extension of temporary alleviation measures in the current school year for transport for post-primary students who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time.

Wider considerations relating to operation of the scheme are now taking place in the next phase of the review which is currently underway. As part of this phase of the review, my Department is currently conducting an extensive stakeholder engagement process. My Department is listening to the views of parents and guardians, students, the education partners and other relevant stakeholders through use of surveys, focus groups and meetings, as well as inviting written submissions. My Department is inviting stakeholders to share their views and opinions so that they may be considered as part of the assessment and in informing policy on the future operation of the scheme.

The Steering Group will continue to report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses.

### **Special Educational Needs**

493. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if she will review correspondence from an organisation (details supplied); the status of the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9916/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The correspondence as noted in the details supplied will be reviewed by officials in my Department and a reply will issue direct to the organisation.

Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

### **Site Acquisitions**

494. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of the purchase of a site for new school building for a school (details supplied); when the school community can expect clarity on the project; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9918/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm two potential permanent site options for Gorey Educate Together Secondary School have been identified and negotiations with the landowners are ongoing.

In relation to the acquisition of permanent sites and as the Deputy will appreciate, the site acquisition process is very complex and subject to completion of successful negotiation and many conveyancing processes. Each acquisition is also very unique and dependant on multiple factors many which may be outside of the control of my Department. The Deputy will also appreciate the importance of conducting a thorough appraisal of site options before proceeding with an acquisition in order to obtain best value for the Exchequer. In this regard, it is not possible to give a specific timeframe for the completion of site acquisitions.

Given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally I am not in a position to comment further at this time. I can, however, assure the Deputy that the acquisition of a new site for Gorey Educate Together Secondary School is a priority for the Department and the patron body will be informed of the location for the school as soon as it is possible to do so.

### **School Staff**

495. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if she will review correspondence (details supplied); the status of the talks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9919/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School secretaries 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. 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. 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 additionally offered to improve the conditions for School Secretaries with regard to sick leave, annual leave and maternity provisions. These offers are subject to agreement on all elements of the claim. Engagement is continuing, with the aim of reaching an overall agreement: the most recent formal talks took place at a meeting at the WRC on 26 January, and the parties are to meet again later this week,

following reflection on the matters discussed at that meeting.

Public servant status and the associated access to a public service pension scheme is not a part of the current offer. As previously set out in the joint statement following the WRC engagement in May 2021, the final element of the claim in respect of public service status is acknowledged by all parties to be more complex and will require more detailed analysis and consideration following the conclusion of current discussions.

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

### **Teaching Qualifications**

496. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education if she will immediately establish an expert review group to examine the minimum essential qualifications for special needs assistants, SNAs, and issue recommendations; if she will provide a clear commitment to implement the expert group recommendations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9920/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than

the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

### **Teaching Qualifications**

497. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education if she will establish an expert review group to examine the minimum essential qualifications for special needs assistants and issue recommendations; and if she will provide a clear commitment to implement the recommendations of the expert group. [9936/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person

appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

### School Attendance

498. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that parents are being told that their child risks being reported for poor attendance due to days taken off with symptoms of Covid-19 as per school and public health guidelines; the steps she is taking to ensure no child is penalised for days taken off with Covid-19 symptoms; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9947/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has provided guidance to schools in relation to the recording and reporting of COVID-19 related absences. COVID-19 related absences arising from pupils/students who have been requested to self-isolate by a medical professional or for students who feel unwell with symptoms consistent with COVID-19 must be recorded in accordance with the school's normal procedures for the notification and recording of absences. However these COVID-19 related absences should be noted by the school as explained absences.

Notwithstanding the current COVID-19 related environment that schools are now operating in, the statutory requirements for reporting pupil absenteeism will continue as normal. In this respect the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 requires the principal of a recognised school to maintain records of the attendance or non-attendance on each school day of each pupil registered at that school which is reported to Tusla.

Tusla Educational Support Service (TESS) receives notifications of all absences from school as per the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. TESS is very aware that some students will be absent for legitimate Covid-19-related health reasons. Absences are reported to TESS as explained and unexplained, and together they make up the cumulative number of days marked absent. This has remained the reporting requirement throughout COVID-19 pandemic.

Daily school attendance data is collected and held at local school level and collected by Tusla at the aggregated level through the Annual Attendance Report (AAR) and, also at the student level through the Student Absence Report (SAR). Any child who misses 20 school days must be reported to Tusla by law, however this may not result in any intervention, particularly if the absences are explained. Where schools have a concern about a child's attendance they are required to make a referral to TESS Education Welfare Service. TESS views all school attendance referrals from a child welfare perspective with the intention of finding solutions that will enable and support students to attend, participate and be retained in education.

## **Teaching Qualifications**

499. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she will immediately establish an expert review group to examine the minimum qualifications of special needs assistants, SNAs, and issue recommendations on same; and if she will give a clear commitment to implement the expert group recommendations. [9948/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

## Special Educational Needs

500. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the current allocation of special needs assistant, SNA, posts in a school (details supplied); if there are plans to increase the number of SNAs at the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9949/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

In light of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the introduction of the new Frontloaded Allocation Model for SNAs for students in mainstream classes in primary and post-primary schools is to be deferred for a further year to the beginning of the 2022/23 school year.

In order to minimise disruption for schools, in the current circumstances, and to provide for continuity of allocations the following arrangements for the allocation of Special Needs Assistants for mainstream classes for the 2021/22 school year:

- Existing mainstream class SNA allocations in schools on 30 April 2021 will be maintained and will automatically rollover into the 2021/22 school year.

- No school will therefore receive an allocation less than that which they had on 30 April 2021.

- SNAs currently in mainstream settings can continue in post for the next school year in the normal way.

- Priority consideration will now be given by the NCSE to applications for increased support for the 2021/22 school year, in particular, applications from schools with no SNAs and developing schools will be prioritised. Determinations will be made before 30 June. Other applications will be processed in order of date received.

- As in previous years, where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website, [ncse.ie/for-schools](http://ncse.ie/for-schools).

The NCSE have published the SNA allocations on their website, [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

The NCSE manages the exceptional review process and handles each case individually. Some review requests can be concluded as an office based exercise, whilst others require a school to be visited in order to observe the current deployment of SNA support in the school setting.

The timeframe for concluding a review can vary depending on the school context or the nature of the information provided.

Where a school is dissatisfied with how their exceptional review has been processed or is dissatisfied with the outcome of their exceptional review they can appeal. Applications for Appeal may be submitted through the NCSE Schools Portal: [ncse.ie/school-support](https://ncse.ie/school-support). Guidelines for Appeal will be published here: [ncse.ie/for-schools](https://ncse.ie/for-schools).

The NCSE have confirmed that the school as outlined in the details supplied, submitted an application for exceptional review of its SNA support on 23/07/2021. The School Visit took place on 14/09/2021 and the outcome issued to the school on 04/10/2021 advising that there was no increase in its SNA allocation.

The school submitted an appeal on 17/10/2021 which was processed and the outcome of the appeal issued to the school on 20/11/2021, the appeal was not upheld.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

### **Departmental Communications**

501. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education if she uses an application on her official Government telephone; if so, if she has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9956/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** While this application is available on my official phone, I do not use it for government business.

### **Special Educational Needs**

502. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if assisted technology will be provided to a student (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9970/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Under the Assistive Technology scheme, as set out in my Department's Circular 0010/2013, funding is provided to schools towards the cost of computers and specialist equipment, which are required for educational purposes.

All equipment provided under this scheme supports children with more complex disabilities who, in order to access the school curriculum, require essential specialist equipment.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports. SENOs also make recommendations to my Department where assistive technology/specialised equipment is required. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in making recommendations for support.

In order to qualify for equipment under the assistive technology scheme, a student must have been diagnosed with a physical or communicative disability and must also have a recommendation in a professional assessment that the equipment is essential in order to allow the student to access the curriculum.

It must also be clear that the existing I.T. equipment in the school is insufficient to meet the child's needs.

Schools make applications directly to the SENO, providing details of the student's special educational needs or disability, including details of the approach taken by the school in making relevant interventions.

SENOs will review the application, and professional reports provided in support of same, in order to establish whether the criteria of the scheme have been met. They will then make a recommendation to my Department as to whether or not assistive technology is required; and based on this recommendation, my Department will decide on the level of grant, if any, to be provided.

The purpose of my Department's Assistive Technology Scheme, as set out in my Department's Circular 0010/2013, is to provide grant-aid to schools to allow them to purchase the type of specialist equipment which has been recommended by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) as being essential for students who have been diagnosed as having a serious physical disability and/or sensory or communicative disability to the extent that their ability to communicate through the medium of speech or writing is materially curtailed.

Although equipment is sanctioned under the Assistive Technology scheme for use by particular students, it is the property of the school, and the school's management authority is responsible for maintenance, repair, and insurance of the equipment.

I can confirm that an appeal for assistive technology for the pupil named by the deputy was received in my Department and this appeal has been unsuccessful on the basis that the application did not meet the criteria for provision of equipment. Correspondence to this effect has issued to the school.

If new information becomes available, it is open to the school to submit a new application to the SENO for consideration.

It is also open to parents to contact SENOs directly to discuss their child's special educational needs, using the contact details available at: [www.ncse.ie/seno-contact-list](http://www.ncse.ie/seno-contact-list).

### **Teaching Qualifications**

503. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Education if she will establish an expert review group to examine and issue recommendations on the minimum essential qualification of special needs assistants and on the need for continuing professional development. [9989/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training

needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

### **Schools Building Projects**

504. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Education if she will take the appropriate steps to make the necessary funding available to facilitate works commencing on a school building (details supplied) without further delay in view that full planning permission has now been granted by Laois County Council for the construction of the new school. [9992/22]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning Stage 2b – Detailed Design, which includes the application for all statutory consents, including Planning Permission, Disability Access Certification and Fire Safety Certification and also the preparation of tender documentation.

The Planning Permission Application was submitted to the Local Authority on June 1st 2021 and the Design Team have advised that the decision to grant planning has been received in recent days. The Disability Access Certificate has been granted. The Fire Safety Certificate application was lodged with the Fire Officer in August 2021 and an extensive additional information request was received in September 2021. The Design Teams response to the Fire Officer was submitted, and their response is pending.

Now that the final grant of statutory applications has been received from the local authority the Design Team will review the conditions and report to the Department shortly.

We await the Fire Safety Certificate and completion of the Stage 2b report.

It is not possible to give a definitive timeline with regard to the completion of Stage 2(b) and the further progression of the project to tender and construction stage

This major building project is included in my Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan.

### **Teaching Qualifications**

505. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education if she will establish an expert review group to examine a minimum essential qualification of a relevant Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, level 6 qualification or the equivalent when new special needs assistants, SNAs, are hired; and if he will issue recommendations (details supplied) in relation to same. [10010/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs including the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the complex needs of some students would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by my Department. It was decided that priority would be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

The first national training programme for SNAs is now in place and it aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

As this is the first programme, it is appropriate to take the time to review outcomes and this will inform the future approach to ongoing training and professional development of SNAs. Part of that consideration will include accreditation.

Raising the minimum qualification for appointment as a special needs assistant has been raised by the FORSA union and has been referred to the Workplace Relations Commission. My

Department is engaging in that process.

The recruitment and appointment of Special Needs Assistants is a matter for each individual school authority. In addition, the actual requirements for a post will vary depending on the specific needs of the children and the school to which the SNA is to be appointed. My Department does not believe that the existing minimum qualifications has impacted on the calibre of person appointed and it is also the case that people with experience and/or higher qualifications than the minimum are often the successful candidate in competitions held by schools.

However, having considered the claim and, in particular, the period of time since they were set, my Department is open to reviewing the position. My Department has also agreed to a review of the SNA contract which was agreed as part of the Building Momentum national pay agreement. My Department is of the view that the forthcoming review of the SNA contract should be carried out and implemented first.

I am satisfied that the approach outlined fully recognises the important place of SNAs in our schools. The forthcoming review of the SNA contract along with the new training programme for SNAs that is now in place will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

### **Special Educational Needs**

506. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education her plans to increase the number of autism spectrum disorder unit places in primary and secondary schools in the Dublin 9 and 11 areas; the timescale for delivery of each in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10022/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education is a priority for this Government.

This year, my Department will spend in excess of €2 Billion, or over 25% of the Department's budget on providing additional teaching and care supports for children with special educational needs.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children with special educational needs nationwide.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

The NCSE continues to work closely with schools within the areas referred to by the Deputy and liaises regularly with the Planning and Building Unit within my Department as part of the process of establishing new classes for the 2022/2023 school year and beyond. As part of this process, both national and local information in relation to projected demand for future special class places for students with autism is considered. Such planning takes into consideration the current availability of special class places and focuses on locations where additional provision may be required.

There are currently 19 special classes (including 1 Early Intervention class) attached to mainstream schools providing ASD placements for students in Dublin 9 and Dublin 11 at primary and post primary level. 4 new special classes for students with autism have been estab-

lished for the current 2021/22 school year, thus providing an additional 24 special class placements across 4 schools for students with autism.

My Department and the NCSE is grateful to those schools that have responded and continue to respond positively to meet the educational needs of children in their communities.

The NCSE through its network of local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs), having established the level of demand locally, are actively engaging with the management authorities of all schools in the Dublin area, including in Dublin 9 and 11, on the opening of additional ASD classes for 2022/23 and beyond.

The opening of some of the planned special class places is dependent on the completion of building works.

Parents seeking special class placements for their children are advised to contact NCSE locally so that their needs can be taken into account for planning purposes.

The local SENOs remain available to assist and advise parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at [ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list](https://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list).

Information on the list of schools with special classes, the type and location of these classes is published on the NCSE website and is available at: [ncse.ie/special-classes](https://ncse.ie/special-classes).

### **Special Educational Needs**

507. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education when details of the new model for allocating special needs assistants to schools will be known; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that schools are enrolling students with additional needs now but that they have to wait until May 2022 before they know what supports will be available to them; her views on whether this could lead to a large number of exceptional reviews being submitted to her Department which will cause delays; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10050/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

Where circumstances change during the course of the 2021/22 school year that materially increase the level of care need in a school to the extent that the school can clearly demonstrate that it cannot be met within the existing SNA allocation, the school may apply to the NCSE for a review. Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website: [ncse.ie/for-schools](https://ncse.ie/for-schools).

All stakeholders will be advised when the SNA allocation process has been completed and this will be done in line with previous years in May.

### **School Staff**

508. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made in finalising the pay and conditions for school secretaries and caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10058/22]

**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 later this week, following reflection on the matters discussed at that meeting.

While there is agreement in principle to take the same approach to the consideration of appropriate pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers there remains a deficit of data on working terms and conditions of such staff. When the final package for secretaries has been agreed and an implementation plan is in place for schools and for the Department, similar engagement, on regularising the pay and conditions of grant funded caretakers, will begin.

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

### **State Pensions**

509. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a review of the pension for a person (details supplied) can be carried out; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9095/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned reached pension age on 20 October 2021 and applied for State pension (contributory) on 4 August 2021. Determination of pension eligibility depends on the individual nature of an applicant's social insurance record. According to the records of my Department, the person concerned has a self-employment record since the 2014 tax year.

Under social welfare legislation, a self-employed contributor is regarded as satisfying the

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contribution conditions for State pension (contributory) where the person has paid self-employment contributions in respect of at least one contribution year prior to reaching pension age (currently 66 years), and all self-employment contributions payable are paid.

Where outstanding self-employment contributions are paid subsequent to an applicant's reaching pension age, State pension (contributory) will be awarded from the date on which self-employment liabilities are deemed as discharged.

The person's application was disallowed on 4 October 2021 as they had self-employment liabilities outstanding for the 2019 tax year. They were informed of this decision in writing and advised to contact my Department when these liabilities were paid. According to the records of my Department, the date of settlement of the person's self-employment liabilities was 11 January 2022.

The person's social insurance record was updated accordingly, and State pension (contributory) was awarded from 11 January 2022 when the legislative eligibility conditions for receipt of pension were satisfied.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

510. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Social Protection the contribution history record of a person (details supplied); the reason the person does not qualify for treatment benefit for medical appliances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9122/22]

**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 for treatment benefit (when aged over 66 years) a PRSI contributor must satisfy the conditions of having a total of 260 paid contributions at class A/E/H/P or S since starting work and 39 contributions paid or credited in the relevant tax years.

The person concerned does not meet this criteria. Although they have the required 260 paid contributions, they do not have the 39 paid or credited contributions in any of the relevant tax years 1989 to 1996, which are the relevant tax years on which their eligibility is based. There is no record of paid or credited contributions for the person concerned since 1981. As a result, they do not satisfy the conditions for the Department's treatment benefit scheme at this time.

However, if the person concerned is the holder of a medical card they may have an entitlement to treatment under the parallel HSE scheme. If this is the case they should contact their local HSE health office for advice on making a claim.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

511. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of recipients across all social assistance and social insurance payments, by payment type, as of February 2021, in tabular form. [9146/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The information requested is set out in the following table. The table outlines the breakdown of recipients by payment type for the main Department of Social Protection schemes, which were available, as of the end of February 2021.

**Recipients by Payment Type (February 2021)**

Scheme	Cheque	Bank Transfer (EFT)	Post Office (EIT)	Total
Adoptive Benefit	0	7	0	7
Back To Education Allowance	2	5,531	464	5,997
Back To Work Enterprise Allowance	1	2,577	7	2,585
Carer's Allowance	15	56,520	32,739	89,274
Carer's Benefit	0	3,314	368	3,682
Child Benefit	0	530,350	105,660	636,010
Community Employment Programme	0	19,328	0	19,328
Disability Allowance	2	90,665	62,617	153,284
Disablement Benefit	1,413	13,376	664	15,453
Farm Assist	15	3,487	1,901	5,403
Health and Safety Benefit	0	26	0	26
Illness Benefit	2,948	45,013	1,178	49,139
Injury Benefit	75	780	8	863
Invalidity Pension	20	48,995	10,323	59,338
Job Initiative	0	546	0	546
Jobseeker's Allowance	1,435	58,235	80,698	140,368
Jobseeker's Benefit	765	32,603	2,531	35,899
Maternity Benefit	38	19,595	0	19,633
One Parent Family Payment	3	22,217	16,970	39,190
Partial Capacity Benefit	16	3,169	19	3,204
Part-Time Job Incentive Scheme	2	147	31	180
Paternity Benefit	13	588	0	601
Rural Social Scheme	0	3,045	0	3,045
State Pension (Contributory)	253	337,976	113,130	451,359
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	13	44,810	50,210	95,033
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	326	3,274	7,140	10,740
Tús - Community Work Placement Scheme	0	3,967	0	3,967

Scheme	Cheque	Bank Transfer (EFT)	Post Office (EIT)	Total
Widow/er's or Surviving Civil Partner's Contributory Pension	32	77,432	45,499	122,963
Working Family Payment	0	46,517	171	46,688

### Social Welfare Benefits

512. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of recipients across jobseeker's benefit and related schemes as of February 2021; and the number of days that recipients been receiving payment, per scheme, in tabular form. [9147/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The information requested is set out in the following table, which outlines the recipient numbers for Jobseeker's Benefit related schemes, as of the end of February 2021, broken down by the average duration on each of these schemes.

Scheme	Recipients	Average Duration (Days)
Jobseeker's Benefit	17,986	125
Jobseeker's Benefit - Casual	12,281	198
Systematic Short Time Workers	3,320	148
Over 65's	2,312	201
TOTAL	35,899	

### Social Welfare Benefits

513. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for a benefit payment by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9185/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Benefit Payment for 65 Year Old's is a payment for people aged between 65 and 66 years who have ceased employment or self-employment. '

In order to be eligible for Benefit Payment for 65 Year Old's a person must satisfy all the conditions for the payment:

- Be aged between 65 and 66 years
- Have ceased employment or self-employment
- Be resident in the Republic of Ireland
- Satisfy the contribution conditions

In terms of the contribution conditions a person must have 39 contributions paid or credited in the year governing their claim; in this case the Governing Year is 2020.

If this condition is not satisfied a person must have 26 paid contributions in both the Govern-

ing Year (2020) and the year before (2019).

The person concerned has no recorded contributions in 2019 and 28 A contributions in 2020

Therefore, the person concerned does not satisfy the contribution conditions and thus does not qualify for this payment. A decision letter to this effect has been issued to her on the 16/02/2022.

### **State Pensions**

514. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for the State pension (contributory) by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9211/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** According to the records of my Department, the person concerned will reach pension age on 26 February 2022. Their application for State pension (contributory) was received on 16 February 2022. The person's State pension (contributory) entitlement will be examined by a Deciding Officer and they will be notified of the outcome.

Under current eligibility conditions, an individual must have 520 full-rate paid contributions in order to qualify for standard State pension (contributory). 520 full-rate contributions equate to 10 years of full-rate insurable employment. Factors such as an individual's social insurance record, their attachment to the workforce, and their countries of employment affect the rate of pension entitlement.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned has had periods of self-employment. I have arranged for a copy of the person's social insurance record to issue to them. A qualifying condition for State pension (contributory) for self-employed contributors is that all self-employment liabilities must be paid in full. Failure to discharge any outstanding liabilities for any years of self-employment contributions may result in a delay in the date of eligibility for State pension contributory. The person concerned is therefore advised to ensure that self-employment liabilities have been paid.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

515. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) in County Kerry is eligible for the treatment benefit scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9216/22]

**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 Department has undertaken a review of the social insurance record of the person con-

cerned and can confirm that they are now eligible for the Treatment Benefit Scheme. An approval notification for optical benefit will issue to them shortly.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Code**

516. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider changing the law in order that young persons attending school at senior cycle can retain the entitlement to child benefit until the end of the school year instead of withdrawing it on reaching the age of 18 years of age at a time when they cannot qualify for other support and costs are not reduced in any way for the family. [9235/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Child Benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their 18th birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. Child Benefit is currently paid to over 631,000 families in respect of almost 1.2 million children with an estimated expenditure of more than €2.1 billion in 2022.

There are currently no plans to extend Child Benefit in respect of full-time students in second level education who are over 18 years of age. Such an extension would have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

Families on low incomes may be able to avail of a number of social welfare schemes that support children in full-time education until the age of 22, including:

- Increase for a Qualified Child (IQCs) with primary social welfare payments;
- the Working Family Payment for low-paid employees with children; and
- the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.

These schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked to household income and thereby support low-income families with older children participating in full-time education.

As part of Budget 2022, I increased the rates for a qualified child aged under 12 by €2 to €40 per week, and for a qualified child aged 12 or older by €3 to €48 per week, from January. I increased the level of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance by €10 to €160 for each child aged 4 to 11 years and to €285 for each child aged 12 and over. I also equalised the income limits for one and two parent households, thereby making it easier for lone parents to qualify for that payment. Budget 2022 also provided for a €10 weekly increase in the income limits for Working Family Payment, and I am pleased that this will now come into effect from April, 2022.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

517. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an illness benefit payment will be reinstated for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9266/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Illness Benefit is paid for a maximum of one year if a person has between 104 and 259 total reckonable PRSI contributions paid. It is paid for a maximum of 2 years if a person has over 260 total reckonable PRSI contributions.

The person concerned has been paid for a full year of Illness Benefit. Their entitlement to payment has exhausted as, according to the Department's records, he has 150 total reckonable PRSI contributions paid.

The person concerned has indicated that he worked in the UK for a number of years. My Department has requested the UK PRSI record of the person concerned to ascertain if he has further contributions which can be used to bring his total contributions up to 260 and qualify him for another year of Illness Benefit. Once his UK PRSI record has been received from the UK his claim will be reviewed.

If the person concerned is experiencing difficulties meeting his financial commitments he should contact the Department's representative, formerly known as a Community Welfare Officer, at his local Intreo Centre so that an assessment of his circumstances can be carried out to determine whether he might qualify for assistance under the terms of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

518. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason that a person (details supplied) is unable to receive the fuel allowance given that they are living alone and are in receipt of the invalidity payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9306/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned is in receipt of invalidity pension and disablement benefit.

The person concerned does not qualify for fuel allowance under the National Fuel Scheme as she is in receipt of a disablement benefit payment and disablement benefit is a non qualifying payment for receipt of fuel allowance.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme, a Heating Supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances that have special heating needs. If a recipient of a social protection or HSE payment has exceptional heating costs due to ill health, infirmity or a medical condition which s/he is unable to meet out of household income, that person may apply for a Heating Supplement.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **State Pensions**

519. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider providing assistance to a specific group of pensioners (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9433/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Ireland has a unified system of social security whereby all contributions paid by workers (and their employers, where

applicable) are paid into a single fund, the Social Insurance Fund (SIF), from which various benefits are paid to those with the established entitlement.

The Irish social welfare system recognises different categories or “Classes” of workers. The rate of contribution paid by these categories differs. They can therefore access different levels of social insurance benefits. For example, Class A employees, generally private sector employees and post 6 April 1995 public servants, pay a combined employer and employee PRSI rate and qualify for all social insurance benefits. In contrast, Class B public sector employees pay a much lower combined PRSI rate. Consequently, they qualify for a restricted range of social insurance benefits. They do not qualify for the State pension (contributory), relying instead on their occupational pensions.

The State Pension (Contributory) is a social insurance payment for people aged 66 or over, who satisfy certain social insurance contribution conditions. The purpose of the State Pension (Non-Contributory) which is a means tested payment, is to ensure those individuals with limited or no income or assets receive the most support from the State.

Primary weekly social welfare payments are intended to enable recipients to meet their basic day-to-day income needs. In addition, my Department also provides a range of other payments, both cash and non-cash, on a weekly, monthly, or less frequent basis. These payments are considered secondary in nature.

The Living Alone Increase (LAI) is one of those secondary payments. It is not a scheme or a stand-alone payment, but rather it is a supplement to a social welfare payment to people aged 66 years or over, who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments and who are living alone.

The criteria for Fuel Allowance are framed to direct the limited resources available to the Department in as targeted a manner as possible, and so it is focused on recipients of long-term social protection payments where an applicant satisfies a means test. People in receipt of such long-term supports are unlikely to have additional resources of their own and are more vulnerable to poverty, including energy poverty.

The Government is acutely aware of the increase in consumer prices in recent months, especially the increase in fuel and other energy prices. To help mitigate the effects of these rising costs, the Government has announced additional expenditure measures to a total of €505 million which will make a positive impact on the incomes of all households in our country.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, Exceptional Needs payments may be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost which customers are unable to meet from their own resources. Decisions on such payments are made on a case-by-case basis.

Any decision to allow those in receipt of occupational pensions who are not in receipt of a qualifying payment to receive the fuel allowance or the living alone increase would have budgetary consequences and would have to be considered in the context of budget negotiations.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Social Welfare Code

520. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the measures that are in place for those reaching 65 years of age who should qualify for the over-65s benefit payment but do not satisfy the PRSI contribution criteria as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the loss of income; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9498/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Benefit Payment for 65 year olds was introduced in line with the Programme for Government commitment, to provide a benefit payment for people aged 65, who are required to retire, or who chose to retire, without a requirement to sign on, engage in activation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work.

The payment is made under the Jobseeker's Benefit or Jobseeker's Benefit (Self-Employed) social insurance schemes in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 12 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 as amended in the case of Jobseekers Benefit (JB) and Chapter 12A of the same Act in the case of Jobseekers Benefit Self-Employed (JBSE).

The rate of payment for both Jobseekers Benefit and Jobseekers Benefit self employed is paid at a graduated rate which is determined by a person's average earnings in the general contribution year (GCY), which is the second last complete tax year (from claims made in 2022 this is 2020). However, Benefit Payment for 65 year olds is paid at the maximum weekly personal rate which is €208 irrespective of the previous earnings or income.

To be eligible for the payment a person must satisfy all the qualifying conditions of the scheme including the requirement to have the specified number of social insurance contributions paid.

The Social Welfare (Covid-19) (Amendment) Act 2020, provides, amongst other measures, for the attribution of social insurance contributions, for a prescribed period, to insured persons who were beneficiaries of certain Covid-19 income support payments. These payments include the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and Jobseekers Payment in lieu of PUP.

The attribution of contributions ensured that persons entitled to and in receipt of the PUP had social insurance contributions attributed to them at the same value as they were paying while employed immediately before going on the payment.

If a self-employed customer was entitled to and in receipt of PUP, or a jobseeker's payment in lieu of PUP, and was not liable to make a self-employment contribution in respect of the 2020 contribution year, they will, in accordance with the provisions of Statutory Instrument 730 of 2021, Social Welfare (Consolidated Contributions of Insurability)(Amendment)(No.2) (Attribution of Self-Employment Contributions) Regulations 2021, be attributed 52 self-employment contributions in respect of that year. This attribution process is expected to happen in early March.

These measures mean that people who lost their employment arising from the Covid-19 pandemic will not be disadvantaged in accessing social insurance benefits in the future, including the Benefit Payment for 65 year olds.

Where a person does not satisfy the conditionality for receipt of the Benefit Payment for 65 year olds they may apply for means tested Jobseeker's Allowance.

Finally, If the Deputy is referring to a specific case I would advise that they should forward the details to my Department for review,

I trust that this clarifies the position.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

521. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for a jobseeker's allowance in the case of a person

(details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9506/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned has had their claim for Jobseeker's Benefit (Self-Employed) (JBSE) awarded at a weekly rate of €208.00.

This rate is payable from 19/02/2022, and a decision letter to this effect has issued to the customer.

### Social Welfare Benefits

522. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9507/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Invalidity Pension is payable to an insured person who satisfies certain Social Insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions and who is permanently incapable of work due to an illness or incapacity and for no other reason.

Claimants must have at least 260 (5 years) paid PRSI contributions class (A, E, H or S) since entering social insurance and 48 contributions paid or credited in the last or second last complete contribution year before the relevant date of their Invalidity Pension claim.

The relevant date is:

(a) any date after the completion of one year of continuous incapacity for work, or

(b) any lesser period that may be prescribed, subject to the conditions and in the circumstances that may be prescribed where the insured person has entered into a continuous period of incapacity for work and he or she is subsequently proved to be permanently incapable of work.

The person concerned submitted a new application for Invalidity Pension on 26 January 2022. It was decided that the relevant year in this case is 2021. According to the Department's records there are 0 weeks qualifying contributions paid or credited for her in the contribution year prior to the relevant date (2020) and 0 weeks qualifying contributions paid or credited for her in the second last year prior to the relevant date (2019). This application has been disallowed and the person concerned was notified of the decision on 16 February 2022, the reasons for it and of her right of review and appeal.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Benefits

523. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9508/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Following a review of her application for an invalidity pension (IP), the person referred to has been awarded IP with effect from 28 October 2021 and received her first payment to her nominated bank account on 17 February 2022. Any arrears due from 28 October 2021 to 16 February 2022 (less any over-

lapping social welfare payment) will issue shortly. The person in question was notified of this decision on 10 February 2022.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

524. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for a supplementary welfare allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9509/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Supplementary Welfare Allowance is a weekly allowance paid to people who have insufficient income to meet their needs and those of their families.

The person concerned applied for a basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance with effect from 03/02/2022 and provided supporting documentation on 13/02/2022. In the assessment of her claim the Designated Officer asked the person concerned to provide further information in a letter dated 16/02/2022.

On receipt of the requested information, the person's application will be assessed, and she will be advised of the outcome in writing.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

525. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an appeal for carer's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9510/22]

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

An application for CA was received from the person concerned on 20 September 2021.

The evidence submitted in support of this application was examined and the deciding officer decided that although a certain level of care was being provided the level involved did not amount to full-time care.

The person concerned was notified on 6 October 2021 of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

A request for review of this decision was received on 18 October 2021. Following this review the decision remained unchanged. The person concerned was notified on 13 November 2021 of the outcome of this review, the reason for it and of his right of appeal.

According to Department records the person concerned has not requested an appeal of this decision to the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO).

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## Social Welfare Appeals

526. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an appeal for an exceptional needs payment in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9511/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The purpose of the Exceptional Needs Payment (ENP) is to assist people with essential, once-off, exceptional expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income.

The ENP scheme is demand led and payments are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance.

Applications for ENPs are made under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme administered by Designated Persons in the Community Welfare Service in my Department.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned applied for an ENP for a house kit-out. The claim was disallowed on the basis the person's means were in excess of the prescribed limit for a person of her circumstances and she had sufficient means to meet her need. The person's net income, derived from her Maternity Benefit payment and wages from her employer, was €311.53 over the Supplementary Welfare Allowance weekly rate for her family composition.

A decision letter dated 29/10/2021 issued to the person concerned advising her of the outcome of her application and affording her the option of seeking a review of the Designated Person's decision.

Determinations made in relation to claims made under Sections 200, 201 and 202 of the Social Welfare (Consolidation Act) 2005, namely allowances-in-kind, ENPs and UNPs, can be reviewed by a SWA Reviewing Officer under Section 323 of that Act.

Following a request from the person concerned a review of the decision was undertaken and the original decision was upheld. The person concerned was advised of the outcome in writing on 16/12/2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

## Social Welfare Benefits

527. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for the fuel allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9512/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Fuel allowance (FA) is a means tested payment, payable to people who either live alone or only with certain other qualified people. The person concerned was awarded FA with effect from 17 November 2021 and he was also awarded living alone allowance (LAA) and telephone support allowance (TSA) from this date. On 19 November 2021 a letter issued informing them of this.

Their first payment was made by their chosen payment method on 24 November 2021 and any arrears of allowance due have issued to the person concerned. FA is paid during the winter

months only.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

528. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for the fuel allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9513/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** According to the records of my Department, the person concerned has not yet applied for fuel allowance. I have arranged for an application form to be issued to them. On receipt of a completed application, the person's eligibility for fuel allowance will be determined by a Deciding Officer and they will be notified of the outcome.

Fuel allowance is a means-tested payment to assist householders on long-term social welfare payments towards the cost of their heating needs. The main eligibility conditions that apply to the fuel allowance scheme are that a person must be in receipt of a qualifying payment, must satisfy a means test and must either be living alone or with other qualifying persons. The fuel allowance means test is linked to the maximum rate of State pension (contributory). An individual applicant can have a combined weekly household income of €120.00 above the maximum rate of State pension (contributory) and still be eligible for fuel allowance.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

529. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); when a decision will issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9514/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person referred to is in receipt of invalidity pension, awarded to her on 03 December 2021 with effect from 07 October 2021. She received her first payment to her nominated bank account on 16 December 2021 and received arrears due from 07 October 2021 to 15 December 2021 (less any overlapping social welfare payment) on 13 January 2022. The person in question was notified of the decision on 03 December 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

530. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); when a decision will issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9515/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person referred to

was awarded invalidity pension with effect from 28 October 2021 and received her first payment to her nominated bank account on 06 January 2022. She received all arrears due for the period 28 October 2021 to 05 January 2022 on 13 January 2022. The person in question was notified of this decision on 22 December 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### State Pensions

531. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process to date in the determination of an application for a State pension in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9516/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** According to the records of my Department, the person concerned reached pension age on 1 November 2012 but has not yet applied for State pension (contributory).

Under current eligibility conditions, an individual must have 520 full-rate paid contributions in order to qualify for standard State pension (contributory). 520 full-rate contributions equate to 10 years of full-rate insurable employment. Factors such as an individual's social insurance record, their attachment to the workforce, and their countries of employment affect the rate of pension entitlement.

I have arranged for a copy of the person's social insurance contribution record to issue to them, together with an application form for State pension (contributory). On receipt of a completed application, the person's entitlement to State pension (contributory) can be determined and they will be notified of the outcome.

Another option is the Increase for qualified adult payment. As the person's spouse is in receipt of State pension (contributory), the person concerned may qualify for an Increase for qualified adult (IQA) payable with their spouse's pension. This is a means-tested payment, payable to a State pension (contributory) recipient whose spouse, civil partner or cohabitant is being wholly or mainly maintained by them, and where that qualified adult's personal means from any source does not exceed a means test income limit.

The rate of IQA depends on the rate of State pension (contributory) in payment to the primary pensioner and on the IQA means test. The means test for IQA is assessed on the qualified adult's means, solely or jointly held (50% of jointly-held means).

Where a qualified adult is assessed with weekly means of less than €100, the maximum rate of IQA is payable. Where assessable weekly means are over €100 and not more than €310, a tapering reduced rate of IQA is payable. If the qualified adult has means of more than €310 per week, this exceeds the means limit and there is no entitlement to an IQA payment.

I have therefore arranged for an application form to issue for the IQA payment, if the person's spouse wishes to apply for this Increase on their State pension (contributory) in respect of the person concerned. Eligibility will be determined on receipt of a completed application form.

Where eligibility is established for both the State pension (contributory) in the person's own right and for the IQA payment on their spouse's pension, the more financially beneficial rate of payment will be awarded.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

532. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process to date in the determination of backdating a jobseeker's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9517/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Person concerned applied for Jobseekers Allowance on the 20th of September 2021 and requested a backdate of the application to May 2021.

Jobseekers Allowance was awarded from the 20th of September 2021. However the back-date was disallowed as the customer was not in the State between May 2021 and the 11th of September 2021. The person concerned signed documentation to confirm they were out of the State during this period.

A disallowance letter was issued to the customer in relation to this backdate refusal on the 08 December 2021.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

533. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process to date in the determination of an application of the fuel allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9518/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Person concerned applied for Fuel Allowance on the 18th October 2021, They were contacted by the Deciding officer on the 19th of October 2021 and advised to submit a letter of attendance for either School or University in respect of their child who is over 18 years of age. This documentation is required to ascertain if there is an entitlement to fuel in the household.

The requested documentation was not submitted therefore a determination of eligibility could not be completed. It is open to the applicant to supply the requested documentation and a Deciding Officer will re-examine this application.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

534. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process to date in the determination of an application for the fuel allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9519/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Fuel Allowance is a payment of €33.00 per week for 28 weeks ( a total of €924 each year) from October to April, The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. One allowance is paid per household.

Qualifying payments for Fuel Allowance are those payments that are considered long term payments and an applicant must also satisfy a means tests.

The person concerned is in receipt of Illness Benefit. Illness Benefit is a short-term payment

for those who are certified by their GP as needing to take time out from their employment due to illness, and accordingly is not a qualifying payment for Fuel Allowance.

People who are permanently incapable of work may be eligible for the non-means tested Invalidity Pension, subject to satisfying the relevant social insurance and medical criteria. Those who are substantially restricted in undertaking suitable employment arising from a medical condition may be eligible for the means-tested Disability Allowance, subject to meeting the relevant medical criteria. Recipients of both of these payments, subject to satisfying all qualifying conditions, may be eligible for Fuel Allowance.

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

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

535. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process to date in determination of appeal of back to education allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9520/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Back to Education Allowance is a non-statutory scheme administered by my Department. As such, decisions cannot be appealed to the Social Welfare Appeals Office, but decisions can be reviewed by another Officer of my Department.

The person concerned applied for Back to Education Allowance on 28 September 2021. This application was refused on 01 October 2021 on the grounds that they were not in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for the required period of time and were not commencing the first year of a course of study.

The person concerned was not happy with this decision and requested a review. This decision was reviewed and the person was notified on 14 October 2021 that the original decision was upheld.

My officials have looked at the case again and are satisfied that there are valid grounds for a further review. The person concerned will be notified of the outcome as soon as a decision is made.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

536. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in processing an application for supplementary welfare in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9522/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, my Department can make a single Exceptional Needs Payment to help meet essential, once-off expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to

meet out of their weekly income. There is no automatic entitlement to these payments which are payable at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case, in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned applied for assistance with the cost of household items and furnishings for her current address with effect from 30/09/2021. Applications for 3 ENPs were processed, and the person concerned was awarded a total of €2,749 on 04/10/2021. There is no record of any outstanding ENP application in respect of the person concerned.

The person concerned is in receipt of a Disability Allowance, Household Benefits package, and fuel allowance payments from my Department.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

537. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in processing an appeal for a disability allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9523/22]

**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 11 January 2022.

Under social welfare legislation the decision of an Appeals Officer is generally 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.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

538. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process to date in the determination of an appeal of a carer's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9524/22]

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

I can confirm that the person concerned is in receipt of CA in respect of her care recipient

since 31 May 2012.

Once claims are in payment, the Department periodically reviews them to ensure that there is continued entitlement. Depending on the circumstances in each case and to make best use of resources, a review may only concentrate on a specific condition of entitlement.

A review of CA was undertaken on foot of information that the person concerned was engaged in employment.

A person can be considered to be providing full-time care and attention where they are engaged in employment, self-employment or on training courses for a maximum of 18.5 hours per week, provided that they can show to the satisfaction of a deciding officer that adequate care has been provided for the care recipient in their absence. Where a carer has commenced employment or increased the hours they are working, the onus is on the carer to notify the Department of the change in their circumstances.

A review initiated and their application on 5 March 2020 and the person's file was subsequently referred to a local Social Welfare Inspector (SWI) to evaluate means and to confirm that all the conditions for receipt of carer's allowance are satisfied.

On foot of the SWI report, correspondence issued to the person concerned on 21 September 2021 to advise that her CA and Carer's Support Grant (CSG) payments were under review as she failed to submit information requested by a SWI. As it was not possible to determine whether she satisfies the conditions for the receipt of CA her payment was suspended from 30 September 2021. The person concerned was offered the opportunity to furnish any statement of evidence on the matter.

To date the person concerned has not responded to the correspondence of 21 September 2021. A Deciding Officer will notify the person concerned of the outcome of this review and provide them with the opportunity to review or appeal this decision.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

539. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process to date in the determination of an application for an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9525/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person referred to is in receipt of an invalidity pension (IP), awarded to her on 20 September 2021 with effect from 01 July 2021. She received her first payment to her nominated bank account on 07 October 2021 and arrears due from 20 September 2021 to 06 October 2021 (less any overlapping social welfare payment) issued on 04 November 2021. The person in question was notified of this decision on 20 September 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

540. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an appeal for a jobseeker's allowance in the case of a person (de-

tails supplied); when the appeal is likely to be brought to a conclusion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9528/22]

**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 generally final and conclusive and may only be reviewed under Section 317 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act, 2005 by the Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts.

The Chief Appeals Officer has power under Section 318 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 to revise any decision where it appears to her that the Appeals Officer's decision was erroneous by reason of some mistake having been made in relation to the law or the facts.

The Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 (Section 327) also provides that any person who is dissatisfied with either the decision of an Appeals Officer or a revised decision made by the Chief Appeals Officer may appeal that decision or revised decision, as the case may be, to the High Court on any question of law.

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 Benefits**

541. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for a supplementary welfare allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9529/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** A basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) is a weekly allowance paid to people who have insufficient income to meet their needs and those of their families. If a person has claimed a social welfare payment but it has not yet been paid and they have no other income, they may qualify for basic SWA while awaiting a decision on their claim.

The person concerned applied for a basic SWA with effect from 20/01/2022. Further information was requested from the person on 01/02/2022 in order to progress his application. To date the person concerned has not provided the requested information.

The Deputy advised in a previous Parliamentary Question that the person concerned applied for a Jobseeker's Allowance. According to my officials there is no record of a recent paper application for a Jobseeker's Allowance payment in respect of the person concerned. The person concerned was advised by the Designated Person on 01/02/2022 to make an application for a Jobseeker's Allowance but to date he has not done this.

In the absence of the requested information and an application for a Jobseeker's Allowance the Designated Person was unable to progress the SWA application for the person concerned and the claim was closed on 15/02/2022. It is open to the person concerned to provide the requested information and a completed application for Jobseeker's Allowance within the next 14

days and his SWA claim will be re-opened.

The quickest and easiest way to apply for a Jobseeker's Allowance is online at [www.my-welfare.ie](http://www.my-welfare.ie). All relevant documentation should be uploaded with the application to facilitate a prompt decision.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

## **Pensions Reform**

542. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social Protection the plans for persons who face mandatory retirement and wish to continue working past their 65th birthday, which will benefit the State through tax take and allow persons in negative financial situations to continue to earn valuable income; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9536/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Deputy will be aware that there is no statutory compulsory retirement age for employees in Ireland. Responsibility for setting retirement age is a matter for the employer/employee relationship and the contract of employment. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has made rulings in a series of age-discrimination cases concerning Directive 2000/78/EC, which prohibit work-related discrimination on various grounds, including age. The CJEU has clarified that mandatory retirement ages may be set down by employers within the context of national law, whether by contract, custom and practice or other means, but that these must be objectively and reasonably justified by a legitimate social policy aim, with the means of achieving that aim being both appropriate and necessary.

Employees have recourse to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) in the event of breaches and the WRC has a number of adjudications on such matters. To assist employers and employees in this regard and in respect of retirement ages, the WRC has produced a Code of Practice on Longer Working, and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has published guidance material for employers on the use of fixed-term contracts beyond normal retirement age.

The Deputy will also be aware that we established the Pensions Commission in November 2020 to examine the sustainability of the State Pension system and the Social Insurance Fund, in fulfilment of a Programme for Government commitment. The Commission was an independent body comprised of knowledgeable and experienced academics, pension experts, members of civil society and representatives of workers and employers. Once it completed its work and fulfilled its obligations, the Commission was dissolved. The Commission's Report was published on 7th October 2021. The report, Technical Sub-Committee's working papers and submissions made to the Pensions Commission are available on the website, [pensionscommission.gov.ie](http://pensionscommission.gov.ie).

The Commission's Report is a comprehensive report that takes account of an assessment of various analyses of population, labour force and expenditure projections; an examination of international approaches; and responses to an extensive consultation process. It established that the current State Pension system is not sustainable into the future and that changes are needed. It has set out a wide range of recommendations in this regard - including aligning retirement ages in employment contracts with the State Pension Age, PRSI base broadening measures, and allowing a person to continue paying PRSI contributions past State Pension Age to improve their social insurance record for State Pension (Contributory) purposes.

Successive Governments have committed to supporting older peoples' continued engage-

ment in economic and social life, including in the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013), the Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Fuller Working Lives (2016) and the Roadmap for Pensions Reform 2018 – 2023 (2018). Building on the work of these previous groups, the Pensions Commission supported measures to facilitate and encourage fuller working lives. The Commission also fully supported Government commitments to facilitate employees remaining at work past the prevalent contractual retirement age of 65 if they wish to.

In the interests both of older people and future generations of older people, this Government intends to consider the comprehensive and far reaching recommendations in the Pensions Commission's Report very carefully and holistically. The report was referred to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands. That Committee published its views on the 2nd February 2022. I and my officials will consider these views in our deliberations over the coming weeks.

Separately, as set out in its terms of reference, the Commission on Taxation and Welfare is considering the report of the Pensions Commission in the context of its review of potential changes to the social insurance system, including relevant PRSI rates and coverage recommendations. In addition, my officials are examining each of the recommendations and consulting across Government through the Cabinet Committee system.

I think it is really important that we complete that work and get those views before reaching conclusions on any one recommendation such as the recommendation to align retirement ages in employment contracts with the State Pension Age. I intend bringing a recommended response and implementation plan to Government by the end of March this year.

The State Pension is the bedrock of the pension system in Ireland. It is extremely effective at ensuring that our pensioners do not experience poverty. This Government is committed to ensuring that this remains the case for current pensioners, those nearing State Pension Age and today's young workers including those who are only starting their careers.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Departmental Advertising**

543. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount her Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9582/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department has not paid for advertising or features in the magazine specified.

### **Pensions Reform**

544. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has considered providing a top-up payment for Irish citizens living in the State and receiving pensions from overseas to bring these payments in line with the standard State pension rate (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9591/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The State Pension (Contributory) is a PRSI-based pension, financed by contributions made by current workers and their employers, and paid to pensioners, at a rate based upon their PRSI record when working. A person is required to have a minimum of 520 paid reckonable PRSI contributions in order to qualify for the State Pension (Contributory). The actuarial value of the State Pension is esti-

mated at over €300,000 which requires people who claim a contributory pension to have made at least 10 years of paid contributions over the 50 year term of a working life. It is reasonable to require people who seek a contributory pension to have made at least 10 years paid contributions into the Social Insurance Fund which finances it.

Those with fewer than the minimum number of PRSI contributions paid over the years may alternatively qualify for the State Pension (Non-Contributory), which is a means-tested pension, financed by the Exchequer, and paid at up to 95% the maximum rate of the State Pension (Contributory). There are also significant disregards in the household means test for the State Pension (Non-Contributory). Alternatively, if their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an increase for a Qualified Adult (based on their own means), amounting up to 90% of a full rate State Pension (Contributory). The most advantageous payment for a pensioner will depend upon their individual circumstances.

The State Pension is the bedrock of the pension system in Ireland. It is extremely effective at ensuring that our pensioners do not experience poverty. This Government is committed to ensuring that this remains the case for current pensioners, those nearing State Pension age and today's young workers including those who are only starting their careers.

There are no plans for a top-up payment to be made to those who do not qualify for either the State Pension (Contributory) or the State Pension (Non-Contributory) and it is not clear on what basis such an approach could be considered.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

545. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will include a small cohort of persons (details supplied) in the free travel scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9656/22]

**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 1,023,000 customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on free travel in 2022 is €95 million.

In general, access to a free travel pass for those aged under 66 is linked to a person being in receipt of certain primary Social Protection payments such as Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Carer's Allowance, Blind Pension and Partial Capacity Benefit.

There are a range of disabilities and medical conditions that can prevent a person from holding a driving licence and to award a free travel pass to a person with any one of these conditions in isolation would immediately result in calls for all people who are not allowed to hold a driving licence because of their medical condition to receive the free travel pass and could result in challenges under the Equal Status Act.

If the Free Travel scheme were to be extended to all people who are not allowed to drive due to their disability, regardless of whether they receive a qualifying payment, a medical assessment process would be required for all such applications, significantly changing the nature of the scheme and requiring additional administrative processes to be put in place in order to adjudicate eligibility. Significant extra funding would also be required and accordingly, it could

only be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

While consideration is always given to any requests to improve or extend eligibility to the free travel scheme, uncoupling the link between receipt of particular social welfare payments and eligibility for the free travel scheme would so fundamentally alter the scheme that it would move it away from being a social welfare measure to being a general transport initiative.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, my Department may award a travel supplement, where the circumstances of the particular case so warrant. The supplement is intended to assist with ongoing or recurring travel costs that cannot be met from the client's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. Every decision is based on consideration of the circumstances of the individual 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.

### **Departmental Schemes**

546. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department will ensure job initiative scheme supervisors are treated the same way as community employment scheme supervisors in terms of their pension entitlements (details supplied). [9657/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Department of Social Protection delivers a range of employment and income support schemes including Community Employment (CE) and the Job Initiative (JI) Scheme. These schemes are delivered by independent bodies funded by the Department. CE and JI are delivered by sponsoring authorities and managing agents. While the Department funds participant and supervisor wages, the Department is not the employer of any scheme participants, their supervisors or team leaders.

The State is not responsible for funding pension arrangements for employees of private companies, even where the companies in question are reliant on State funding. Pension arrangements are a matter to be agreed between employees and their employers. All employers, including CE and JI sponsoring organisations are legally obliged to offer access to at least one Standard Personal Retirement Savings Account (PRSA) under the Pension (Amendment) Act 2002.

As the Deputy will be aware, CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years through their union representatives, SIPTU and Forsa, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme for CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors who are employed by CE scheme sponsoring organisations.

Within this context, officials from my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform held discussions on proposals to progress and resolve this complex issue, while having regard to the wider budgetary framework. Department officials also held discussions with unions representing CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors.

These discussions were held on the clear agreement of all involved that they related solely to those parties who were the subject of the 2008 Labour Court recommendation, namely CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors, and any agreement reached on the proposal arising from these discussions would apply only to those parties.

I wish to acknowledge the valuable and dedicated service that JI team leaders and JI participants provide in delivering local based community services. My Department is fully committed to the future of employment support programmes and will continue to support and improve them for the benefit of the supervisors, team leaders and participants, given the valuable contribution being made to local communities through the provision of services.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Public Services Provision**

547. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9840/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department has not, at any time, been the beneficiary of an award bestowed by the cited publication.

### **Social Welfare Rates**

548. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the increasing number of older persons falling into poverty as a direct result of the cost of living increases; if her attention has been further drawn to the fact the value of the €5 increase agreed for the State pension in Budget 2022 has already essentially been wiped out with the rise in carbon taxes, fuel costs and cost of living; if she will commit to a secured annual increase in the State pension to address the increasing cost of living for those in receipt of the pension given that almost 70% of persons reliant on the State pension did not qualify for the extension of the fuel allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9846/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The social welfare package in Budget 2022 was the highest in 14 years and meant that some 1.4 million people, including over 700,000 pensioners, received a €5 increase in weekly payments, and more if they have dependents. In addition to improvements in core social welfare rates, there were a number of targeted measures designed to support those most vulnerable to poverty, including increases to the Fuel Allowance and Living Alone Allowance. As energy prices were increasing, I ensured that the increase to the Fuel Allowance rate was implemented from Budget week. I also broadened eligibility for the scheme.

As a result of these targeted measures, many of the most vulnerable pensioners have seen larger increases in 2022. For example, a pensioner in receipt of fuel allowance, living alone, will see an increase of €13 per week during the fuel season due to measures introduced in Budget 2022.

The criteria for fuel allowance are framed in order to direct the limited resources available to the Department, in as targeted a manner as possible. People who are in receipt of a qualifying contributory payment are required to satisfy a means test, while recipients of non-contributory payments are accepted as satisfying the means test.

The amount of means allowed to qualify for fuel allowance is the equivalent of the current maximum rate of State Pension (Contributory) (SPC) including any increases, plus €120. This means for example, that a person in receipt of SPC, with a qualifying spouse, may have a total weekly income of just over €600 and still qualify for fuel allowance.

I am acutely aware of the increase in consumer prices in recent months, especially the increase in fuel and other energy prices. To help mitigate the effects of these rising costs, the Government has announced additional expenditure measures costing in excess of a half a billion Euro, which will make a positive impact on the incomes of all households in our country.

The measures include an additional lump sum payment of €125, which will be paid to all households in receipt of the Fuel Allowance payment. It is expected that this additional lump sum will be paid in early March at an estimated cost of €49 Million.

As such, this lump sum payment is intended to target the most vulnerable pensioners, as well as other social welfare recipients, to ensure that they are protected against rising fuel costs.

This payment, in addition to the Budget increase to the Fuel Allowance, will mean low-income households see an increase of 41% this Fuel Allowance season compared to the last season.

While not all pensioners will benefit from this lump sum payment, every household in the State will receive an Energy Credit of €200, which will to be applied to electricity bills.

The Government will continue to monitor this situation carefully.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

549. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider awarding the fuel allowance on a sliding scale rate in order that applicants who are marginally over the guidelines, particularly those who are elderly or in ill health, could qualify for even a partial payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9855/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Fuel Allowance is a payment of €33.00 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €924 each year) from October to April, at an estimated cost of €366 million in 2022. It is estimated that up to 400,000 households will benefit in 2022. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

The criteria for Fuel Allowance are framed in order to direct the limited resources available to the Department in as targeted a manner as possible. This ensures that the Fuel Allowance payment goes to those who are more vulnerable to fuel poverty including those reliant on social protection payments for longer periods and who are unlikely to have additional resources of their own.

In Budget 2022 the Government increased the weekly means threshold for the fuel allowance scheme by €20 to €120 above the appropriate rate of contributory State pension representing a 20% increase in the threshold which enables more people to qualify for this support.

Any decision to introduce a system of tapered fuel rates for cases that have means greater than the allowed €120 would have cost implications for the scheme and could only be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations. The €120 a week means limit is significantly higher than the weekly fuel allowance rate of €33 and also the combined weekly total of household benefits and fuel allowance added together (€41.05). It should be recalled that many of those aged over 66 are solely dependent upon the State pension, and so a person who has additional pension income above €120, is not among the more disadvantaged people that Fuel Allowance is targeted towards.

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

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

550. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a social welfare payment will be reinstated in the case of a person (details supplied) following an appeal that was allowed by the Social Welfare Appeals Office; when the arrears will issue in respect of the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9861/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Deserted Wife's Benefit is a social protection payment introduced in 1973 made to women who were deserted by their husbands. Entitlement to payment is based on social insurance contributions paid by either the woman or her husband. The scheme closed to new applicants with effect from 2 January 1997, on introduction of the One Parent Family payment.

Following the decision of the Appeals Officer, the weekly Deserted Wife's Benefit payment of the person concerned has been re-commenced from this week and all due arrears have been issued.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

551. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will examine the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9901/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's benefit (CARB) is a payment made to insured people who leave the workforce to care for a child or an adult in need of full-time care and attention. An increased payment can be made where full-time care is being provided to two people.

To qualify the carer must satisfy PRSI conditions, employment conditions, show that they are providing full-time care and attention and must show that the care recipient requires full-time care and attention.

The person concerned applied for CARB on 8th Sept 2021. The claim was disallowed as the person concerned, although providing a level of care and attention, was not providing full-time care and attention as defined in the Carer's Benefit Legislation. The person concerned was notified on 5th Oct 2021 of this decision, the reasons for it and of her right of review and appeal.

The person concerned appealed this decision and a full time care form was issued to her on 10 Jan 2022 to outline the hours and duties she provided.

New information was received by way of this completed full time care form on 26 Jan 2022 and a review was carried out. Following a review, the decision remained unchanged and the person concerned was notified on 27 January 2022.

The persons' concerned file was forwarded to the Appeals Office on 31 Jan 2022 for consideration.

The person concerned will be notified of the outcome of her appeal in due course.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

552. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) who spent five months on a community employment scheme has been told they will not be entitled to do another scheme for 12 months; if this will be reconsidered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9902/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** Community Employment (CE) is a labour market activation programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people with an opportunity to engage in work experience and training opportunities within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

In general CE placements for new entrants aged between 21 and 55 years are for 1 year. As the Deputy may be aware, CE participants who are working towards a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) major award can seek to extend their participation on CE by up to 2 years to enable them to reach the required standard of qualification. CE participants aged 55 years or older can remain on CE for 3 years and do not have to work towards a QQI major award.

The person concerned commenced her CE on 29/07/2019 and her term on the scheme was extended until 22/07/2022. However, the sponsor advised the Department that she left the scheme on 22/09/2021, having completed two years on the programme, to take up employment.

To requalify for Community Employment, the person concerned must be in receipt of a qualifying payment for 12 months.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

553. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to recognise fibromyalgia as a condition under which sufferers are entitled to disability allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9908/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department of Social Protection provides a range of income supports for those who are unable to work due to an illness or disability. Entitlement to these supports is not contingent on the nature of the illness or disability itself but on the extent to which a person's capacity to work is restricted by illness or disability.

In all cases a deciding officer of my Department makes a decision in line with the provisions specified in the relevant social welfare legislation including supporting medical evidence supplied by the applicant and taking into account the opinion of the Department's Medical Assessor.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Social Welfare Eligibility

554. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has considered removing the rule with regard to the supplementary welfare allowance and the general 30-hour eligibility rule given that many low- and middle-income households are struggling with the rising cost of living and that this fund is intended to be available to those who are facing financial difficulties; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9937/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) is a demand led scheme acting as a safety net within the overall social welfare system to provide assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependents. The maximum basic weekly rate of payment from SWA is €206. There are increases available on this rate for adult and child dependents, where applicable.

A number of client categories are specifically excluded in legislation from receiving assistance under the SWA scheme. These include people in full-time work and people in full-time education.

Where a person has commenced employment and is awaiting wages, basic SWA can be paid up to a maximum period of 30 days. Employees with children on low incomes are eligible to apply for to my Department for assistance under the Working Family Payment Scheme.

For persons dependent on income support payments from this department and/or for those working on low incomes, under the SWA scheme a supplement can be awarded to assist with ongoing or recurring costs that cannot be met from a person's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. In addition, officers can make a single exceptional needs payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. Decisions on ENPs and SWA supplements are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case.

People in full time employment of 30 hours or more per week, under the minimum wage structure, exceed the SWA basic weekly rate while excluded from some SWA schemes, are eligible to seek assistance in the form of an Urgent Needs Payment under the scheme.

Anyone seeking to make an application for a payment under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance schemes should contact the Community Welfare Service at their local Intreo Centre. There is also a national Income Support Helpline in place - 0818-800024 - which will direct callers to the appropriate office.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

## Social Welfare Benefits

555. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of successful applications to the supplementary welfare allowance, by month, since October 2021 to date by income bracket (details supplied) in tabular form. [9938/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme is the safety net within the overall social welfare system in that it provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. Supports provided under the SWA scheme can consist of a

basic weekly payment, a weekly or monthly supplement in respect of certain expenses, as well as single exceptional needs payments (ENPs) and urgent needs payments (UNPs).

The basic supplementary welfare allowance provides immediate assistance for those in need who are awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment or do not qualify for payment under other State schemes.

Rent supplement provides short-term income support to eligible people living in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source. The scheme ensures that for those who were renting, but whose circumstances have changed due to temporary loss of employment, can continue to meet their rental commitments.

Under the SWA scheme, a supplement can be awarded to assist with ongoing or recurring costs that cannot be met from the client's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. In addition, officers can make a single exceptional needs payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. Decisions on ENPs and SWA supplements are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case.

Table 1 shows the number of Basic SWA and supplement recipients by month since October 2021.

Table 2 shows the number of Exceptional Needs Payments and Urgent Need Payments paid by month since October 2021.

Information on the household income of these recipients is not collated.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

**Table 1 - Number of Basic SWA and supplement recipients by month since October 2021**

-	End of October 2021	End of November 2021	End of December 2021	End of January 2022
Basic SWA	10,737	10,679	10,824	10,523
Rent Supplement	14,443	13,771	13,401	12,975
Other Supplements	3,764	3,741	3,698	3,643

**Table 2 - Number of Exceptional Needs Payments and Urgent Need Payments issued by month since October 2021**

-	October 2021	November 2021	December 2021	January 2022
ENPs/UNPs	4,700	5,103	4,489	3,596

### School Meals Programme

556. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she plans to carry out a review of the packaging used by the providers of school lunches under the school meals programme to ensure that all packaging is environmentally friendly; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9944/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The school meals programme provides funding towards the provision of food to some 1,506 schools and organisations benefitting 230,000 children. The objective of the programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children who are unable, due to lack of good quality food, to take full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement.

My Department provides the funding directly to the schools and organisations, who are then required to procure the provision of the food in compliance with relevant HACCP, Food Safety and Nutritional Standards. The Department does not have any contractual relationship with persons or companies involved in supplying food to schools or organisations.

The method and logistics of supplying the meals, as well as arrangements regarding packaging are addressed between the school and the supplier.

An independent evaluation of the school meals programme is being undertaken. Policy on waste and packaging will form part of this review.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Departmental Communications**

557. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she uses an application on her official Government telephone; if so, if she has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9967/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The application referred to by the Deputy is on my Government phone. The application is used on occasion, usually for transmitting videos for social media use in relation to my Department's work. The 'disappearing messages' function is not activated.

### **Departmental Offices**

558. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the fact that persons, including many older people, have been forced to queue outside in the cold at a social welfare office (details supplied); the steps she is taking to address this; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9980/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My officials in Coolock Intreo Centre have not been made aware by customers of any issues with queues outside the building nor have any complaints been received by my Department.

The Coolock Intreo Centre is located in the Northside Civic Centre, in which a variety of other public service providers including the HSE, MABS and the Citizens Information Centre are based.

There is a building manager in place in the Northside Civic Centre to manage health and safety and other building-related matters on behalf of the tenants. The manager ensures that the number of customers accessing the Northside Civic Centre at any given time enables them to conduct their business in a safe environment. The number of customers seeking access to the Intreo Centre is constantly monitored by management and staff throughout the day. Where necessary, additional resources are provided to avoid increased waiting times for customers.

The nearby Kilbarrack Intreo Centre has been closed since June 2020 due to the necessity to undertake extensive refurbishment building works. The Kilbarrack office is due to re-open in the coming weeks, and this will further assist in reducing the number of the Department's customers visiting the Northside Civic Centre.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **State Pensions**

559. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an overpayment assessment of a State pension (non-contributory) in the case of a person (details supplied); the reason for the delay in making a decision on the case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10019/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Following an investigation by a Social Welfare Inspector, the details of an estimated overpayment of State Pension (Non-contributory) arising from previously undisclosed capital were communicated to the solicitor administering the estate.

The solicitor has been in contact with the Social Welfare Inspector since this communication and has now requested that a formal decision on the overpayment, including a repayment offer, is made by a Deciding Officer in the Department's Estates Section.

The file, along with all supporting documentation, has been forwarded by the Social Welfare Inspector to Estates Section for their attention and prompt action.

### **Social Welfare Payments**

560. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding a disability payment for a person (details supplied) in Dublin 9; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10021/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Following notification from jobseekers allowance (JA) regarding the spouse of the person concerned and their commencement of employment, a review of the disability allowance (DA) was carried out. Departmental records show that both parties are living at the same address.

On 17th August 2021, a request for information regarding their spouse's earnings, which was required in order to carry out a review of their means, was issued to this person. On receipt of the requested information a review was carried out and the person concerned was informed of the decision in writing on 26th August 2021 and of their right to request a review of the decision or to appeal it with the independent social welfare appeals office (SWAO).

The person concerned appealed the decision to assess means on their DA to the SWAO stating that their husband was not living with them. On 20 January 2022 their appeal was disallowed as the Appeals Officer found that the evidence does not establish that they are separated or living as separate household units and they were informed of this directly in writing by that office.

Their file has been sent to a social welfare inspector (SWI) for a report on their means and circumstances to be completed. On receipt of this report a further review will be carried out.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

561. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason the fuel allowance claim by a person (details supplied) has been disallowed. [10057/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Fuel Allowance Scheme is designed to assist pensioners and other welfare-dependent householders on long-term social welfare payments towards the cost of their winter heating needs. The fuel allowance represents a contribution towards a person's normal heating expenses and is not intended to meet them in full. It is means-assessed and is paid only to customers who meet all the qualifying conditions.

The main eligibility conditions for receipt of fuel allowance are that a person must be in receipt of a qualifying payment, live alone or with other qualifying persons, and satisfy a means test. The fuel allowance means test is linked to the maximum rate of State pension (contributory) and Increase for qualified adult. Currently, the applicant and their spouse can have a combined weekly household income of €120 above the maximum rates for State pension (contributory) and Increase for qualified adult and still be eligible for fuel allowance.

An application for fuel allowance from the person concerned was received on 27 October 2021. According to the records of my Department, the person's spouse is not in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment in their own right, nor are they a qualified adult on the State pension (contributory) of the person concerned.

Consequently, the person was notified on 5 January 2022 that they do not qualify for fuel allowance as their household includes people who are not eligible for the purposes of fuel allowance. If these circumstances change, it is open to them to reapply for fuel allowance.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Disabilities Assessments**

562. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the processes that are in place for assessing chronic pain associated with medical conditions such as fibromyalgia with regard to disability supports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10059/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Assessments of medical eligibility for Disability Allowance (DA) are based on medical reports and other evidence furnished by the applicant and the applicant's treating physician.

Under Social Welfare legislation, it is a deciding officer (DO) who decides upon any and all questions in relation to a person's eligibility for DEASP schemes, including DA. In arriving at his or her decision, a DO will review all evidence available to him or her, including that provided by the person's own doctor. He or she will also have regard to the opinion of the Department's medical assessor (MA). The Department's MAs are fully qualified medical practitioners who have experience and specialist training/qualifications in occupational medicine as well as in human disability evaluation. The MA's assessment and resulting opinion given to the DO is made in accordance with the Department's evidence-based medical guidelines and protocols. These guidelines/protocols are available for viewing on the Department's website.

It is important to note that the DO is not disputing the person's diagnosis or treatment but rather is assessing the person's eligibility for the relevant scheme in accordance with the relevant statutory conditions. Each DO is trained in the principles of decision making and natural Justice. Scheme guidelines are provided to ensure consistency and a standardised approach in decision making. Each DO is familiar with the legal basis for making their decision and comply within these provisions. They act impartially and make decisions based on supporting documentation. If the customer in question is unhappy with this decision she may submit an appeal to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Employment Schemes**

563. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of the remaining service within a service (details supplied) given the tendering process under way for the new local area employment service, which is to replace the existing services provided by the local employment service and job clubs; if her Department still plans to publish a tender for this service; and, if so, the timeframe for the tender. [10099/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In 2019 and 2020, the Institute of Employment Studies and Social Finance undertook a review of all contracted employment services, including EmployAbility. The review and proposed changes to the EmployAbility procurement model are under consideration though significant changes is unlikely before contracts starting in 2023.

The review did recommend, amongst other things, competitive procurement, moving from annual to multi-annual contracts and a significant expansion of capacity.

EmployAbility currently operates as a closed tender process, confined to an existing service provider in a particular geographical area. It is only when an existing provider is no longer in a position to provide the contracted service that a new contractor is sought. The Department received legal advice from the CSSO regarding the closed tender process for externally contracted employment services, including EmployAbility. The advice stated that these contractors were obliged to be competitively procured.

Departmental officials visited every EmployAbility service in the State as part of a consultation process in Q4 2019. However, progress towards reforming employment services for people with disabilities was slowed by Covid-19, though there are still plans to examine the current provisions with a view to making them entirely consistent with EU law.

My Department is aware of the key importance of ongoing engagement with this sector before significant changes are undertaken.

### **Social Welfare Fraud**

564. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will account for a situation that was decided on recently in the courts; and the way that a payment was obtained for so long without verification (details supplied). [10104/22]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The case is one of the most serious incidences of fraud that has been detected in many years. It was the inspectors and seconded Gardaí in my Department who secured this prosecution following an extensive

investigation.

My Department uses a range of measures to ensure that fraud is identified, prevented, and minimised. Where it is established that a fraud has occurred, such as in this case, they are pursued in a variety of ways, including by prosecutions through the Courts and recovery of any sums overpaid. In the case referred to I welcome the sentence imposed by the court which will act as a deterrent to others who may deliberately provide false information, fabricate facts or documents, or consistently mislead my Department over a prolonged period.

I would emphasise that my Department has control review processes in place on its state pension schemes which are designed to detect fraudulent encashments. Deaths registered are also monitored with the General Register Office, which is now part of my Department.

My Department regularly reviews the control measures in place across its schemes and continues to improve its control measures based both on the types of fraud and attempted fraud cases detected and using business analytics to inform its control measures. These control processes are subject to regular audits, including by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, and are considered to be fit for purpose.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Childcare Services**

**565. Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the grants that are available for persons looking to set up a childcare, breakfast club or after-school facility in the community as either a community group or a private operator; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9090/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The works eligible for capital funding are determined by my Department on an annual basis, having regard to the needs of children, families and providers, and to Departmental priorities.

During the 2021 budgetary process, an initial €8.3m was provided for capital funding. A further €2.2m was secured in capital carryover bringing total capital funding available to €10.5m in 2021. The upgrading of the fire safety measures in existing early learning and childcare services was the key objective of the 2021 Capital Programme, with €10.5 million available funding.

During 2021, my Department successfully secured €70m in the revised National Development Plan (NDP) allocation. This will enable significant capital investment in early learning and childcare during 2023-2025. Investment under the NDP will consist of three pillars: Modernisation, New Capacity and First 5 Initiatives.

(1) Modernisation: Much of the existing early learning and childcare infrastructure that was previously delivered by large scale capital programmes is now in need of upgrading and modernisation in order to be fully compliant with new regulations and more recent guidelines, as well as to maximise energy efficiency. This investment will prioritise follow-up funding for buildings that were funded through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP), with funding also available for previously non-funded infrastructure.

(2) New Capacity: Ireland is approaching the limits of capacity, with shortfalls for early

learning and childcare places already evident in some areas and for some cohorts. The rates of participation in early learning and childcare are also lower than European averages. As investment in subsidisation grows in the coming years as committed to in First 5 and the Programme for Government, demand from parents will also increase. In the coming years, NDP capital funding allocated to early learning and childcare will be used to increase the stock of early learning and childcare infrastructure, in order to address capacity challenges including the undersupply for certain types of provision and in specific areas of the country.

(3) First 5 Initiatives: First 5 (Government Strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019 -2028) was launched in 2018 and was re-committed to in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future. First 5 envisages a range of innovative initiatives for the early learning and childcare sector, including piloting Family and Early Childhood Centres and piloting outdoor early learning and childcare provision, piloting meal provision. Each of these initiatives have capital requirements.

As outlined in the National Development Plan 2021-2030, access to affordable early learning and childcare is inherently linked to creating an equitable society, sustainable communities and a thriving economy. Early learning and childcare provision is therefore considered under the National Development Plan, along with housing, schools and health facilities as an integral part of national infrastructure.

Capital funding has been reduced in 2022 to €0.5m as my Department focusses on the preparation of distribution of NDP funding from 2023 onwards. This will include setting eligibility criteria, designing and developing the application process, and establishing approval criteria. This 2022 allocation is for Childminding and Parent and Toddler Groups, who maintain 2021 allocations. In addition, my Department has secured some €750k of unspent 2021 capital funding which will be carried into 2022. This funding will be made available to provide financial assistance to providers to comply with fire safety regulations.

Further information on the Department's NDP allocation and the application process will be communicated to the sector in the near future. The Department advises the service to contact their local CCCs, who will provide information on future capital supports when it becomes available.

### Departmental Funding

566. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will develop a specific fund for local authorities to develop and improve playgrounds in their area on a multi-annual basis. [9144/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My department has administered the *Capital Grant Scheme for Play and Recreation* every year since 2013. The Scheme provides support for the development of new play and recreation facilities and the refurbishment of existing play and recreation facilities and / or incorporating natural play elements. A key criteria of the Scheme is that facilities funded are accessible to all children.

The *Capital Grant Scheme for Play and Recreation* is run in conjunction with each of the 31 Local Authorities; via the Local Authority Play and Recreation Network (LAPRN). This approach is taken to allow each Local Authority to assess and prioritise needs in their area and to enhance the level of accountability under this grant heading.

The allocation for the Scheme in 2022 is €450,000, calls for applications have issued to all

Local Authorities, the closing date for return of applications is 8th March 2022.

The scheme and fund will be reviewed in 2022.

### Children in Care

567. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will order a review of the foster care committee to ensure its procedures are in line with HIQA guidelines. [9152/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Foster Care Committee, Policy, Procedures and Best Practice Guidance was developed in 2012 and reviewed and updated in 2017. It was written to reflect the requirements of the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003.

The document sets out:

- Policy and procedures for the operation of Foster Care Committees nationally.
- Policy, best practice guidance and information for social workers and others whose duty it is to prepare and submit documentation to Foster Care Committee.

The National Foster Care Committee Policy, Procedures and Best Practice Guidance is due for review in 2022 and it is anticipated that this review will commence in Q3/ Q4 2022.

### Children in Care

568. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will reform the foster care review programme whereby Tusla requires foster carers to pay for their own medical examination. [9153/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Tusla have confirmed that they are currently reviewing the Foster Care Review process. As part of the consultation process the matter of costs for medical examinations has arisen.

Tusla have advised that new guidance in respect of foster care will ensure that all foster carers subject to a medical examination will be reimbursed their expenses or their expenses will be paid by Tusla. Tusla anticipate that this work will be completed by Q2 2022.

As an interim measure and pending the completion of this review, Tusla have advised that the costs of medical examinations for foster carers are to be reimbursed.

### Child Protection

569. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of private family care arrangements from 2015 to date. [9154/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Tusla does not collate data on arrangements where families, even in consultation with Tusla, establish an alternative temporary care arrangement within their family or family

network. However, data is published by Tusla on children who are in receipt of family support, children who are in ongoing child protection safety planning processes and children who are in the formal care of the State.

### **Childcare Services**

570. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the progress that has been made towards addressing the inadequate level of pay for creche workers as provided for in Budget 2022. [9208/22]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I firmly believe that the level of pay in the sector should reflect the value of the work that early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners do for children, for families, for society and the economy. The most recent available data indicates the average hourly wage for non-managerial staff in the sector in 2021 was €12.60, with many staff working part-time or on temporary contracts. I am very conscious of the need for significant improvement in both pay and conditions of employment.

As the Deputy is aware, the State is not the employer, and my Department does not set wage levels nor determine working conditions for staff in the sector. However, I am doing all that is in my power to address the issue.

In particular, I began a process in December 2020 to examine the possibility of regulating pay and conditions and the suitability of a Joint Labour Committee for the sector. This process culminated in the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee, which began meeting in December 2021.

Supported by the new Core Funding stream I announced in Budget 2022, there is now a real prospect of improvement in pay rates through the Joint Labour Committee. The scale of allocation under the new Core Funding stream - which is €69m in 2022 and equivalent to more than €207m in a full year - will, among a number of objectives, enable providers to meet the conditions that may be set in an Employment Regulation Order.

In addition, in December 2021, I published “Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028”, which includes commitments to develop career pathways, promote careers in the sector, and strengthen supports for continuing professional development, which will complement efforts to improve pay and conditions of employment in the sector.

### **Family Resource Centres**

571. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount of additional funding that was made available for family resource centres in each of the years 2019 to 2021 to enable them to pay annual increments to their staff. [9209/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, administers the Family Resource Centre (FRC) Programme which provides funding support to 121 FRCs across the country. My Department allocates core funding for the FRC Programme and since 2019, an additional €1.5m has been provided in funding. This has meant that funding for the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 amounted to €18 million.

Since the establishment of Tusla in 2014, the Agency has funded many organisations, mostly in the community and voluntary sector, to deliver services on its behalf under sections 56 to 59 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. These organisations operate independently of Tusla and are responsible for the recruitment of their employees and the terms and conditions under which they are employed. Therefore, the remuneration of these staff is a matter for these organisations as employers.

Each organisation funded under these arrangements operate independently of Tusla. Each is responsible for the recruitment of employees and the terms and conditions under which individuals are employed. Section 56(14) of the Act of 2013 stipulates that ‘an arrangement under this section shall not give rise to an employment relationship between a service provider, its employees or agents on the one hand and the Agency on the other’.

### **Family Resource Centres**

572. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the percentage of family resource centres that have paid the double increment plus 2.5% agreed at the Workplace Relations Commission conciliation for 2018 to their staff. [9210/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Since the establishment of Tusla in 2014, the Agency has funded many organisations, mostly in the community and voluntary sector, to deliver services on its behalf under sections 56 to 59 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. These organisations operate independently of Tusla and are responsible for the recruitment of their employees and the terms and conditions under which they are employed. Therefore, the remuneration of these staff is a matter for these organisations as employers. As such, I cannot provide the data requested by the Deputy.

Each organisation funded under these arrangements operate independently of Tusla. Each is responsible for the recruitment of employees and the terms and conditions under which individuals are employed. Section 56(14) of the Act of 2013 stipulates that ‘an arrangement under this section shall not give rise to an employment relationship between a service provider, its employees or agents on the one hand and the Agency on the other’.

Prior to the establishment of Tusla in 2014 some of the organisations now funded under section 56 were funded by the HSE under section 39 of the Health Act 2004. In October 2018 the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) reached agreement between the Department of Health and HSE and trade unions representing staff in certain section 39 organisations. Pay restoration in relation to organisations funded through section 39 was applied to organisations who met certain specific criteria.

The criteria related to the organisations rather than types of individual workers that are employed in them. The criteria included only organisations who received in excess of an agreed, specified amount from the HSE by way of the Service Level Agreement process. Pay restoration was limited and solely applicable to those organisations included in the initial WRC agreement. This process has reached a final resolution and there is no scope to revisit eligibility criteria.

### **Childcare Services**

573. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of drop-in childcare services operating; the location

of these services by county council; the financial supports available to drop-in services; if he has any particular start-up supports for such services and their business model; the reason that there are so few operating as exclusive drop-in services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9288/22]

576. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of drop-in childcare services broken down by exclusively drop in and also as part of the wider service as a percentage of the overall number of registered childcare services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9291/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 573 and 576 together.

As at the end of January 2022, there were 4,128 early years services registered with Tusla. Of these, 17 services were listed exclusively as a drop-in service, with a further 10 services including drop-in as part of their wider service provision. On this basis, there were 27 services providing drop-in services, representing 0.65% of the total number of early years services on the national register.

Tusla does not collate the requested data by local authority area but does collate it by county. As at the end of January 2022, the total number of registered early years services listed as a drop-in broken down by county is as follows:

County	Exclusively Drop In	Part of Wider Service	Total
Cork	3	0	3
Donegal	0	1	1
Dublin	5	4	9
Galway	3	1	4
Kerry	1	0	1
Kilkenny	1	0	1
Limerick	0	1	1
Louth	0	1	1
Meath	1	0	1
Tipperary	0	1	1
Wexford	2	0	2
Wicklow	1	1	2
Total	17	10	27

Most of the early years services on the Tusla register operating as drop-in services are situated in hotels, shopping centres and leisure centres; however, there are some in other settings, which receive funding by State, (e.g. services operating as drop-in services situated in Family Resource Centres, refugees or Drug Treatment Services).

As with any early years service, drop-in services must register with Tusla and meet the regulatory standards as set out in the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. Drop-in services are intended to be used exclusively on an intermittent basis and children attending should attend for no more than 2 hours consecutively. Given this, children who attend early years services operating exclusively as drop-in services are not funded under my Department’s funding schemes, specifically the ECCE programme (which operates over 3 hours per day, 5 days per week, 38 weeks per year) or the NCS and CCSP.

## Early Childhood Care and Education

574. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the financial supports being provided to early learning and care in relation to insurance costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9289/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Aged Childcare (SAC) services are required to have insurance as part of their registration with Tulsa, the independent regulator of the sector. My Department provides funding to childcare providers under a number of programmes to provide fully or partly subsidised childcare services to families. Childcare providers are private businesses and my Department does not provide funding for specific operational costs such as insurance.

With regard to the cost of insurance, it is important to note that neither the Government, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can direct the pricing or provision of insurance products, as this is a commercial matter which individual companies assess on a case-by-case basis. This position is reinforced by the EU Single Market framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so.

Notwithstanding this, insurance reform is a priority for this Government. The *Action Plan for Insurance Reform*, which was launched on 8 December 2020, contains a range of deliverables in a number of Government Department policy areas. It is intended that the cumulative effect of the implementation of the actions will be to improve the insurance environment, in particular for businesses. I am a member of the Sub-Group for Insurance Reform, chaired by An Tánaiste, which has been set up within the Cabinet Committee for Economic Recovery and Investment to implement these reforms, and will publish progress reports every six months.

Seeking to secure a more sustainable and competitive market through deepening and widening the supply of insurance in Ireland remains a key policy priority for this Government. In this regard, it is the Government’s intention to ensure that the implementation of the *Action Plan* can have a positive impact on the affordability and availability of insurance for individuals, businesses and voluntary groups, including childcare providers.

## Departmental Funding

575. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of Budget 2022 additional childcare funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9290/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Budget 2022 introduced a ground-breaking package of measures for the early learning and childcare sector - designed to deliver quality for children, affordability for parents, stability for providers, and support employers to improve pay and conditions for staff.

In Budget 2022 I have secured an additional €78m in early learning and care (ELC) and school age childcare (SAC) funding, bringing the total investment in the sector to €716m in 2022.

The €716 million investment in ELC and SAC includes €69 million for a new Core Funding stream for providers in 2022, equivalent to €207 million over a full year - this will ensure sustainability of services and support the introduction of an Employment Regulation Order (ERO) to determine minimum rates of pay for workers as well as conditions of employment.

In return for this funding, there will be a commitment from providers not to increase parental fees, meaning the full affordability effects of the NCS and the universal ECCE Pre-school Programme will be felt by parents.

In advance of the introduction of the Core Funding Stream, a Transition Fund, of up to €37m, will be available to providers, also contingent on an agreement not to increase fees from September 2021 levels. This fund will now operate between May and August 2022, after the end of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme in April 2022 and prior to the introduction of Core Funding in September 2022.

*Question No. 576 answered with Question No. 573.*

### **Childcare Services**

**577. Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which he remains satisfied with the level of crèche facilities throughout the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9299/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The availability of high-quality early learning and childcare that is affordable and accessible is a key Government priority.

Since 2015, significant increases in State investment in early learning and childcare has given rise to a substantial growth in the numbers of children participating in these services. More than 100,000 children now participate on the universal pre-school programme on an annual basis and the National Childcare Scheme subsidises up to 80,000 children.

To ensure that the supply of early learning and childcare places meets demand, my Department has, since 2015, funded the creation of more than 27,000 new places through an Annual Capital Programme.

Before the onset of Covid-19, national data indicated that, on the whole, supply of early learning and childcare places was meeting demand, with evidence of undersupply for certain age groups, and in certain areas and my Department was taking a number of steps to address this, principally through capital investment through the National Development Plan.

Data gathered throughout the Covid-19 pandemic revealed lower demand for early learning and childcare, and reduced occupancy among early learning and childcare services. Indeed, data captured in June 2021 found significant vacancy rates across the country – with the national vacancy rate averaging at 21%.

My Department is continuing to monitor early learning and childcare capacity, particularly in light of the recent lifting of Covid-19 restrictions.

Pobal has, using the data captured in June 2021 and current registration data, recently projected vacancy rates in February 2022. While this analysis shows a fall in vacancy rates from June 2021 to February 2022 – with vacancy rates falling from 21% to 19%, this analysis suggests that there is unused capacity across the country. Further analysis is being undertaken by Pobal to establish if this unused capacity varies by type of provision or location, to establish any mismatch in supply and demand for certain cohorts or children or in certain areas.

Pobal will also commence new data collection in April 2022, as part of the Annual Early Years Sector Profile survey. This will allow for updated information on capacity among early

learning and childcare services to be established. In addition, my Department is undertaking research on the early learning and childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities under way.

Parents experiencing difficulty in relation to their early learning and childcare needs should contact their local City/County Childcare Committee (CCC) for assistance. Contact details for CCCs may be found on [www.myccc.ie](http://www.myccc.ie).

### **Departmental Funding**

578. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the next round of core funding for childcare providers and contracts will be announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9315/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Budget 2022 announced the introduction of a new Core Funding stream with an allocation of €69 million in 2022 for the September to December period, equivalent to €207 million in a full year.

The details of Core Funding were further articulated in *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* published in December.

Core Funding will be available to Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) providers for the 2022/2023 programme year, subject to an Employment Regulation Order being agreed by the Joint Labour Committee and coming into effect.

Core Funding is designed to achieve a number of policy objectives simultaneously:

- To support providers to improve quality, principally by improving pay and conditions as the most significant issue impacting on quality
- To improve affordability for parents by ensuring that fees do not increase
- To contribute to providers’ stability and sustainability

The amount of money available to providers will be determined by information on their annual service hours; total service capacity per age range offered; the number of graduate Lead Educators in early years rooms in the service; and if the service has an ELC graduate as the service manager.

Allocations for Core Funding will therefore be based on service capacity and not on child registrations and attendance levels. Capacity is the number of childcare places a service can provide while adhering to the requirements under the Regulations for age ranges/session types/ratios.

This type of funding alongside the existing schemes will contribute to services’ stability and sustainability.

The existing schemes will continue to operate alongside Core Funding with funding distributed based on child registrations and attendance.

The amount payable under Core Funding will be determined at the start of the programme year and will be paid to providers in equal instalments over a 12 month period, and will not fluctuate based on children’s attendance as it is determined by capacity.

Conditions of the contract include maintaining fees at or below September 2021 rates, participating in data collection exercises and offering the National Childcare Scheme (part time/full time/SAC services) and the Early Childhood Care and Education programme (sessional services) to parents.

A Ready Reckoner to support services to determine the potential value of Core Funding to their service will be available in early March.

This will be followed by:

- Stage 1 of the Application process, a data collection survey in April
- Stage 2 of the Application process, providers will be able to define their service's capacity through an online application process which will be open in May
- Contracting in June
- Payments will flow to providers from the end of August

In the interim period in advance of Core Funding, significant additional investment is being made in the sector through the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which will remain available to the sector until April 2022, with a continued exemption to the turnover rule for employers in the sector. Following the cessation of EWSS, a once-off Transition Fund will operate from May to August 2022, to support providers in the period leading up to the new Core Funding stream, in return for a commitment not to increase fees from September 2021 levels. The sum paid to each service under the Transition Fund will depend on the service's capacity and location, and will reflect opening hours.

### **Disability Services**

579. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department was alerted to correspondence between the CEO of HIQA and the CEO of the HSE relating to a matter (details supplied); if so, the date the attention of his Department was drawn to the correspondence; when his attention was drawn to the matter; and when the attention of the Ministers for State at his Department was drawn to the matter discussed in the correspondence. [9416/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Noting that the Department of Health retains responsibility for community and specialist disability services, pending the full transfer of functions to my Department in the coming weeks, my Department was not alerted to the specific correspondence referred the Deputy’s question. The matter itself was brought to my attention by Minister Rabbitte at the end of December.

Until the transfer of functions takes place between my Department and the Department of Health, the issue in the details supplied is a matter for the Department of Health.

### **Departmental Data**

580. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of times he has received correspondence from the CEO of HIQA since he took office; and the dates on which he received the correspondence. [9417/22]

581. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of times he has met with the CEO of HIQA since he took office; and the dates on which such meetings took place. [9418/22]

582. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of times the CEO of HIQA has requested to meet with him since he took office. [9419/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 580 to 582, inclusive, together.

I am collating the information for the Deputy and will respond in due course.

*Question No. 581 answered with Question No. 580.*

*Question No. 582 answered with Question No. 580.*

### **Departmental Advertising**

583. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount that his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9569/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy might note that my Department has no record of payment in respect of advertising or related costs to Public Sector Magazine.

### **Departmental Funding**

584. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the annual funding for domestic violence refuges from 2015 to date by county in tabular form. [9646/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I have referred the question to Tusla for direct response to the Deputy as the matter raised is an operational matter for Tusla.

### **Departmental Data**

585. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9827/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I can confirm to the Deputy that since my Department’s establishment in June 2020, it has not won any awards from the Public Sector Magazine.

### **Climate Action Plan**

586. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, In-

tegration and Youth when he envisages his Department will establish a climate action unit; the reason for the delay in establishing the unit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9892/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** In line with its responsibilities under the Climate Action Plan 2021 - Securing our Future, my Department has established a Climate Action Unit.

### **Departmental Communications**

587. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he uses an application on his official Government phone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application on his phone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9954/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I can confirm to the Deputy that I do have the application on my Department provided phone, but I do not have the disappearing messages function activated.

### **Adoption Services**

588. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 651 of 10 March 2021 and 496 of 9 November 2021, if he will share with this Deputy correspondence which was forwarded to the Department of Health in 1996 by the Adoption Board after the Department inquired from adoption authorities if they had been made aware of or involved in cases of illegal birth registration. [10101/22]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I can confirm that, since replying to Parliamentary Question No. 496 of 9 November 2021, my Department is arranging for correspondence that resembles the Deputy’s description to be released to the Deputy.

This work involves careful and detailed analysis of relevant policy and guidance to ensure that the records are released in a manner that protects the privacy of individuals and respects their rights under the General Data Protection Regulation.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

589. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will review the case of a person (details supplied) in relation to the Higher Education Authority Covid-19 extension fund with a view to resolving the payment issue for current Department of Education teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9044/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** COVID-19, as elsewhere, caused major disruption to all activities at our higher education institutions (HEIs). This includes their research activities. In 2020 the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D/FHERIS), secured a package of €168m to address the impact of COVID -19 restrictions on Higher Education. Of

the €168m, €48m was provided to help address the impact of the same restrictions on research.

I am not involved in the assessment of individual cases. The Higher Education Authority was given responsibility for the allocation of these monies to institutions and the funding is administered centrally by the research office led by the Head of Research (or equivalent) in each institution. Extensions supported by this funding were to be allocated to the researchers and research students in greatest need.

I understand from the HEA that each individual applicant's eligibility to receive a costed extension was determined on a case-by-case basis by their institution and, where relevant, approval to grant a costed extension was to be secured from the appropriate research funder. At TCD part time PhD candidates who are employed by the Department of Education on a full-time basis were confirmed by the institution as eligible to receive a costed extension. In accordance with the 'One Person One Salary' (OPOS) principle, serving public servants require the consent of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in order to undertake other forms of paid remuneration in any part of the public service.

I understand that the institution involved sought consent from the HEA to approach DPER seeking permission to provide the candidates with the extra payment a costed extension would bring. Given that the candidates were in full time public service, and were not previously in receipt of a stipend, the HEA turned down the request in relation to a stipend. Research costs may be issued to the candidates through their research account and any subsequent tax liabilities will be the responsibility of the individual. Fees for those impacted by COVID have been waived by institutions.

### Third Level Education

590. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the target number of graduates from paramedic sciences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9129/22]

592. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of qualified paramedics admitted and graduate from paramedic science degree courses for each year that data is available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9131/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris)(Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 590 and 592 together.

There are three routes to training as a paramedic in Ireland - recruitment by the National Ambulance Service, recruitment by the fire brigade or entry into the University of Limerick's B.Sc in Paramedic Studies. The number of entrants accepted by the NAS and fire brigade is a matter for those organisations, in line with their recruitment needs. While there are other paramedic training courses provided in HEIs, UL's degree is the only one designed for students who are not already working as paramedics. The entrants and graduates from this course are below. As it began in 2016, graduate figures are only available for 2020 at this time.

Year	1st Year Enrolments	Graduates
2016/2017	16	N/A
2017/2018	23	N/A
2018/2019	19	N/A

Year	1st Year Enrolments	Graduates
2019/2020	28	14
2020/2021	32	

My Department is strongly committed to supporting the health of the population through the provision of graduates with the key competencies and skills to be effective in the health workforce, and support a range of clinical teams in our health services.

The Programme for Government commits the Department of Health to working with the education sectors, regulators, and professional bodies to improve the availability of health professionals and reform their training to support integrated care across the entire health service.

My officials are actively engaging with the Department of Health on determining the longer term skills needs of the healthcare services, and the role which the further and higher education sector can play in meeting those skills needs. I will ensure that there is continued engagement with all stakeholders to ensure that we deliver graduates with the skills necessary to support our healthcare system and support the strategic workforce planning by the health sector.

### Third Level Costs

591. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the anticipated cost by year, by student, of a paramedic science degree course for the higher education institute and the Exchequer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9130/22]

596. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the average cost, per year and per student, of a pharmacy place for the higher education institute and the Exchequer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9157/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 591 and 596 together.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) provided the following information to assist the Deputy with her query.

#### Cost to the Exchequer

The HEA has a Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) which allocates core recurrent funding to institutions. The allocation of the core grant is determined on a formula basis – based on a standard per capita amount in respect of weighted EU student numbers (and non-EU research) in broad subject price groups. Student numbers are weighted to reflect the relative cost of the subject groups. The standard per capita amount depends on the total level of funding received each year. Total available funding divided by total weighted student numbers equals the standard per capita amount. The model also takes account of research and access metrics.

The core grant is allocated as a block grant to cover core teaching and research activities within institutions. The internal allocation of funds as between teaching and research and across faculties and departments etc is a matter for each institution.

Students on **pharmacy** and **science** programmes are included and counted for funding purposes in the RGAM. In 2022 such students attracted c.€2,670 per student through the RGAM. In addition, eligible undergraduate students have their fees paid by the Exchequer, exclusive

of the student contribution, under the Free Fees Scheme. The HEA pays c. €4,400 per eligible undergraduate pharmacy/science degree student in the university sector.

As referenced above, students are liable for the student contribution of €3,000. Eligible students may have the student contribution fully or partially paid on their behalf under SUSI.

### **Cost of provision**

The estimated cost per student per year is as follows.

Pharmacy : c.€11,000 - €13,000 per student per year

Science: c €10,000 - €12,000 per student per year

*Question No. 592 answered with Question No. 590.*

### **Qualifications Recognition**

593. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the NFQ level assigned to the diploma in emergency medical science provided to trainee paramedics; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9132/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** There are a range of qualifications offered in the field of emergency medical science across a number of different levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). These qualifications can be found on the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) which is an online resource maintained by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) that provides a comprehensive and authoritative list of all quality-assured education and training qualifications on the NFQ. The IRQ can be accessed here: [irq.ie/](http://irq.ie/).

The professions of Paramedic, Advanced Paramedic and Emergency Medical Technician are regulated professions which, alongside various level of Responder, fall under the remit of the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC). PHECC is an independent statutory body, established by the Minister for Health, which sets the standards of education and training across these professions for the purposes of pre-hospital emergency care in Ireland. PHECC also holds responsibility for conducting examinations leading to the award of the National Qualification in Emergency Medical Technology (NQEMT). Where appropriate, education providers will develop their programme offerings to meet the accreditation standards set by PHECC. Further details on PHECC's educational and training standards alongside information on approved training institutions and courses can be found on its website ([www.pheccit.ie/](http://www.pheccit.ie/)). The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science does not have a role in determining these educational standards.

### **Third Level Admissions**

594. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of pharmacy entrants and graduates in each year since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9155/22]

595. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has engaged with the Minister for Health in order to establish a target, optimum number of pharmacy places in order to meet the needs of society;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9156/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 594 and 595 together.

The information requested by the Deputy on pharmacy entrants and graduates is in the table below.

Year	1st Year Enrolments	Graduates
2010/2011	173	160
2011/2012	191	161
2012/2013	186	140
2013/2014	184	151
2014/2015	193	166
2015/2016	200	169
2016/2017	192	145
2017/2018	200	182
2018/2019	201	168
2019/2020	210	164
2020/2021	221	

My Department is strongly committed to supporting the health of the population through the provision of graduates with the key competencies and skills to be effective in the health workforce, and support a range of clinical teams in our health services.

The Programme for Government commits the Department of Health to working with the education sectors, regulators, and professional bodies to improve the availability of health professionals and reform their training to support integrated care across the entire health service.

My officials are actively engaging with the Department of Health on determining the longer term skills needs of the healthcare services, and the role which the further and higher education sector can play in meeting those skills needs. I will ensure that there is continued engagement with all stakeholders to ensure that we deliver graduates with the skills necessary to support our healthcare system and support the strategic workforce planning by the health sector.

*Question No. 595 answered with Question No. 594.*

*Question No. 596 answered with Question No. 591.*

### Third Level Fees

597. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he is considering steps to reduce the cost of final year for pharmacy students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9158/22]

598. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost to the Exchequer of extending the free fees initiative to the final year of pharmacy in the same form as it is currently applied to all undergraduate courses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9159/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 597 and 598 together.

The Pharmacy Act 2007 conferred responsibility on the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI), the pharmacy regulator, with respect to pharmacy education and training. The PSI is an independent statutory body and is responsible for defining and ensuring the standards of education and training for pharmacists qualifying in Ireland. This includes developing standards, policies and carrying out accreditation of pharmacy degree programmes.

In August 2014, the Minister for Health approved changes to the education and training of pharmacists. This change in Pharmacy education has come about because the regulatory body, the PSI, now requires graduates to have completed a Masters degree before entering the PSI Register and practicing as a Pharmacist.

For those students that commenced their pharmacy course from September 2015, the structure of the pharmacist qualification changed from a four-year Bachelor degree programme followed by a one-year Internship Programme (which resulted in the award of a Level 9 degree) to a five-year fully integrated pharmacy degree programme.

Under the Department's Free Fees Initiative (FFI), the Exchequer pays tuition fees on behalf of eligible first time undergraduate students attending approved full-time undergraduate courses. In order to qualify for funding under the Department's Free Fees Initiative, students must meet the criteria of the scheme.

As referenced above, funding under the FFI is available for undergraduate awards only (up to and including level 8). In practice, this means that only the undergraduate portion of an integrated masters programme would be eligible for free fees funding. A full tuition fee is payable by all students for any postgraduate/Level 9 award portion of the course of study.

Separately, SUSI grant support is available for those students who meet the qualifying criteria such as means, residency, nationality and progression. Different supports are available to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Qualifying students attending integrated/intercalated courses, will be initially assessed in respect of the undergraduate portion of the course. A separate application will be required in respect of the portion of the course deemed to be the postgraduate element.

Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own day-to-day management and operational affairs, including the management of academic affairs. They retain the right to determine their own policies and procedures. The total level of fees to be charged for the postgraduate element of an integrated masters course are therefore solely a matter for the relevant institution to determine in line with its own criteria.

My Department currently has no plans to provide free fees funding for postgraduate years under the FFI therefore the cost of supporting such courses have not been estimated.

Notwithstanding the above, I am very conscious of the difficulties that students, like so many others in society, face as a result of the increased costs of living. For students and their families this includes not just costs such as accommodation and food but also education-specific costs such as postgraduate tuition fees.

I have already taken significant steps to support learners and their families. Effective from the start of the next academic year the rate of grant will be increased by €200 for all SUSI recipients, I have widened the thresholds to allow more people to apply for student grants and I have changed the distance thresholds to reflect the increased costs for those who live further away from their colleges.

I have also put significant additional resources into the Student Assistance Fund, including an additional €1.3 million announced last week, which brings the fund to €18.5m for the current

academic year.

However, the SUSI scheme clearly does not cover everybody, and there are many families who must pay out significant amounts of money each year to continue in third level education. There are different options to address the costs of education and fundamentally these are decisions which must be made in the context of the annual Estimates process. As I look towards the next budgetary cycle, I will be examining all the levers I have to address higher education costs for students in a way that has impact for students and families and that applies broadly across society.

*Question No. 598 answered with Question No. 597.*

### **Covid-19 Tests**

**599. Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount of funding that has been allocated to the Technological University of Dublin for the purpose of enabling it to protect students and staff from Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9236/22]

**600. Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the value of antigen tests made available to the Technological University of Dublin; if such tests are available to staff at the university; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9237/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 599 and 600 together.

In 2020 and 2021 the Government provided additional funding to mitigate against the direct impacts of Covid-19 and support the return of students to further and higher education for the academic years 20/21 and 2021/22.

For Technological University Dublin (TUD) additional funding from within these financial supports was provided via the Higher Education Authority.

Out of the amounts allocated to TU Dublin a combined total of c.€3.78million was reported to the HEA as having been used for purposes which supported the protection of students and staff from Covid-19.

The final amount provided to institutions from within the 2021 allocation will not be finalised until all relevant claim forms have been received and the review and analysis of the final claim forms are completed.

In addition, as part of the 2021 allocation, following public health advice to the sector from the Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing (advice which is published and available on the Department’s website) a once-off fund of €9m to provide rapid antigen testing kits to students in further and higher education was introduced in 2021.

The purpose of the funding was to encourage the use of antigen testing amongst students, providing funding to institutions via the relevant funding agencies to make a small number of antigen tests available free to students. TU Dublin received a provisional €600,750 in support of the provision of antigen testing to students and this allocation was paid in December 2021 (via the HEA). This fund is subject to final report and reconciliation to the HEA at the end of

this academic year.

*Question No. 600 answered with Question No. 599.*

### Apprenticeship Programmes

601. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of carpentry apprenticeships run by individual education and training boards across the country; his plans to include this skill in the education and training boards that do not currently run carpentry apprenticeships; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9240/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Apprenticeships are employer led demand driven educational and training programmes, which aim to develop the skills of an apprentice in order to meet the needs of industry and the labour market. As apprentices are employees, the demand for and number of apprentices is primarily dictated by the employers in any area or sector.

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021 – 2025 requires that apprenticeship intake will grow to 10,000 annual registrations by 2025.

Apprenticeship registrations in 2021 were the highest they have been since 2007, with 8,607 apprentices employed on 62 programmes. The current apprentice population is over 24,000, the highest it has been since 2009. Of last year's registrations, 6,955 were in craft apprenticeship programmes, with over 60% of these in the Electrical, Plumbing and Carpentry and Joinery crafts.

Phase 2 off-the-job training for carpentry and joinery is delivered by Education and Training Boards in the 13 locations nationwide including 3 locations in Dublin. Attached is a table with all the current locations.

Locations
Ballyfermot
Carpentry apprenticeships Training Locations
Tallaght
Tralee
Cork
Letterkenny
Limerick
Dundalk
Waterford
Kilcohan, Waterford
Finglas
Galway
Athlone
Sligo

Also the deputy should note that there has been a substantial increase in provision in the area of 40% in Carpentry and Joinery over the past year. Expansion of the apprenticeship system is continuing in 2022, to include investment in workshops and staff.

## **Departmental Staff**

602. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total number of officials who were transferred from the Department of Education to his Department since its establishment; the total number of officials currently assigned to his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9253/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Following the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in August 2020, 122 officials transferred on foot of the transfer of further and higher education functions from the Department of Education. There are currently 200 officials in total assigned to this Department. This figure includes staff transferred from other Departments including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on foot of the transfer of research functions from that Department.

## **Education and Training Provision**

603. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps being taken to create more roadmaps for persons to access critical skills training and long-term employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9404/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** A key goal of my Department is to ensure individuals are equipped with the knowledge and skills to access sustainable, quality employment. There are a wide range of steps being taken in pursuit of this goal.

The SOLAS Skills to Advance initiative is supporting employees with the skills to progress in their current job, or to take advantage of new job opportunities while supporting SMEs who need assistance to invest in and develop their workforces. Over 10,000 employees benefitted from training provided by their local ETB in 2021.

My Department also funds Skillnet Ireland to provide subsidised training to business. Through their 73 Skillnet Business Networks, it supports over 21,000 businesses and 80,000 trainees annually. Its Climate Ready initiative equips businesses with the practical skills and knowledge to manage the challenges that transitioning to a low-carbon economy presents while a new additional €11m allocation from the Brexit Adjustment Reserve will allow their Business Networks help SMEs plan for success in key areas including digitalisation, sustainability and innovation.

The Skills to Compete initiative delivered through ETBs, working in tandem with INTREO offices, Regional Skills Fora, and Enterprise Ireland, supports those who have lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, to re-enter the workforce. Courses offered are built around three key priorities: delivering the essential skills required for modern workplaces; building strong digital skills; and developing the specific vocational skills to secure opportunities in growing sectors and occupations. An estimated 21,000 people have benefitted to date.

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 sets out new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships to make apprenticeship more accessible to employers and learners, to achieve a target of 10,000 annual registrations across a wide range of programmes by 2025. Expanding apprenticeship across all sectors of the economy has widened its impact in areas of skills shortage such as Engineering, Technology Skills, Logistics and FinTech. Under

the Plan there will be an increase in online visibility of apprenticeship engagement and apprenticeship development processes for employers/sectors who wish to assess the potential for new apprenticeship development.

The development of new apprenticeships is employer-led, with consortia comprising employer groups and educational providers coming together to identify a skills need and appropriate apprenticeship responses in their sector. It is open to any industry that wishes to explore such options to bring forward a proposal. Applications for new apprenticeship development are open on an ongoing basis, allowing all employers to progress the development of programmes in response to emerging skills needs on an as-needed basis.

Springboard+ provides free and subsidised upskilling and reskilling higher education opportunities in areas of identified skills need. The Springboard+ 2022 call for proposals was launched in December 2021 and is expected to launch in Q2 of 2022. The Human Capital Initiative (HCI) forms a key part of the strategic response to a changing world of work and the challenges the economy will face in the period ahead. With a strong focus on innovation and agility, the programmes being supported will ensure that graduates and the education system as a whole, are in a position to respond positively to the challenges and opportunities ahead. Full details on Springboard+ and HCI courses can be found at [www.springboardcourses.ie](http://www.springboardcourses.ie).

Funding of €15m provided 11,597 places on 538 Modular courses in 32 higher education institutions in 2020/21. Following the success of the 2020 July Stimulus programme a further 4,119 places are being provided on Modular Skills Provision courses during the current academic year. All courses are shorter and more focused and are offered in a flexible manner, allowing people to gain important skills without taking a considerable period away from the labour market. They represent a new route into lifelong learning, and provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities for those who need it, while ensuring that they remain close to the labour market.

The Right Course, my Department's one stop shop for businesses, employees and unemployed people, outlines the range of third level options available at [www.gov.ie/therightcourse](http://www.gov.ie/therightcourse).

### **Departmental Contracts**

604. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a company (details supplied) was awarded the contract for provision of SafePass online for SOLAS; when the newly awarded contractor for online SafePass provision will begin online renewals for SafePass; if the same consumer cost savings available in the UK, currently £36, will be passed on to workers requiring online SafePass renewals here which currently cost €200; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9437/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Construction) Regulations 2013, craft and general construction workers, persons undertaking on-site security work and persons or classes of persons as may be prescribed by the relevant Minister are required to hold a safety awareness registration card (Safe Pass card).

SafePass training and assessment delivery has mirrored construction sector activity during the COVID-19 period and has now fully recommenced. Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the running of face to face programmes is subject to adherence with the SOLAS Standard Operational Pandemic Containment Guidelines. These Guidelines included a reduction in the maximum numbers of learners who may physically attend a course. In a number of cases

this has led to a temporary increase in course costs for individual learners.

SafePass training is delivered by SOLAS Approved Training Organisations and tutors. These are private providers and neither the Department nor SOLAS have a role in the setting of fees or in influencing pricing structure within the market place. There is a €32 fee payable to SOLAS for the processing, manufacturing and distribution of SafePass cards which is unchanged and is generally included in the overall price for attending a course.

SOLAS is actively pursuing the activation of an online assessment option for the renewal of Safe Pass cards. In keeping with procurement procedures and government guidelines SOLAS went to tender for this service in June 2021. Following a competitive procurement process, SOLAS has identified a preferred vendor. Final arrangements are being made for the roll out of the new system and additional information, including the go live date, will be notified to the sector as soon as possible.

### Education and Training Provision

605. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total number of places in medicine in each institution by undergraduate and graduate entry medicine for students from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Britain, other European Union and non-European Union international for 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9557/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The data requested by the Deputy is not yet available for the 2021/22 academic year. My Department's key source of enrolment statistics is the HEA's Student Records System (SRS). The census date for the collection of the Student Record System data is the 1st of March of the academic year, and therefore the enrolment statistics for 21/22 have not not been collected. The data for the 2021/22 academic year will be published later this year.

First year enrolments by domicile and HEI for the 2020 academic year, the latest available, are available at the link.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\_pq605-22-02-22\_en.docx">Medicine Enrolments</a>]

### Education and Training Provision

606. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of medical places combined across undergraduate and graduate entry medical allocated to European Union students including Britain and Northern Ireland in each year since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9558/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** For the years in question, the Fottrell Report provided the basis on which the level of provision in medical schools is determined. It specifies that an intake of between 700 and 740 EU students per annum is required to move towards national self-sufficiency. This target marked a more than doubling of the number of EU students who were accepted in to medical schools at the time the report was published.

The number of first year enrolments in medicine courses, by domicile, is available in the table below for the years 2012 to 2020. The data is as reported on the HEA's Student Records

System (SRS). It should be noted that there are some reliability issues for domicile data collected in earlier years.

Row Labels	Ireland	Northern Ireland	Great Britain	(Other) EU	Non-EU	Total
2012/2013	671	10	37	12	418	1148
2013/2014	673	14	45	11	462	1205
2014/2015	718	13	49	10	468	1258
2015/2016	675	16	63	8	524	1286
2016/2017	672	11	34	16	510	1243
2017/2018	665	9	30	14	577	1295
2018/2019	664	7	37	13	598	1319
2019/2020	692	8	18	14	619	1351
2020/2021	721	8	12	13	649	1403

### Education and Training Provision

607. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the anticipated increase in Irish and European Union student places in both undergraduate and graduate entry medicine in the academic year 2022 and 2023; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9559/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I recognise the critical importance of having a strong pipeline of healthcare graduates, and my Department is strongly committed to supporting the health of the population through the provision of graduates with the key competencies and skills to be effective in the health workforce, and support a range of clinical teams in our health services.

The Programme for Government commits the Department of Health to working with the education sectors, regulators, and professional bodies to improve the availability of health professionals and reform their training to support integrated care across the entire health service.

My officials are actively engaging with the Department of Health on determining the current and long term skills needs of the healthcare services, and the role which the further and higher education sector can play in meeting those skills needs. One element of this engagement centres on increasing the number of places available in medicine for Irish and EU students, and discussion between my Department, the Department of Health and the medical schools are ongoing.

I will ensure that there is continued engagement with all stakeholders to ensure that we deliver graduates with the skills necessary to support our healthcare system and support the strategic workforce planning by the health sector.

### Departmental Advertising

608. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9576/22]

615. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9834/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 608 and 615 together.

The Department has not received any awards from this publication.

### Grant Payments

609. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if an application for SUSI support by a person (details supplied) which is currently under appeal will be approved. [9613/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The main support available to students is the statutory based Student Grant Scheme where students are studying for the first time or are progressing to study at a higher level. The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

With regard to the specific application, I have been advised by my officials that there has been ongoing communication between the applicant and SUSI in relation to her application since early December 2021. The application proceeded through the assessment process and SUSI determined that the applicant had submitted insufficient documentation to prove independent residence. The student then proceeded through the SUSI appeals process. The documentation was requested from the applicant and submitted and this was reviewed by the Appeals Officer, The SUSI appeal was finalised and a determination was notified directly to the student.

Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal may be submitted to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board within the required time-frame. Such appeals can be made by the appellant on line via [www.studentgrantappeals.ie](http://www.studentgrantappeals.ie)

As part of a comprehensive customer service and communications strategy provided by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), to ensure that all necessary avenues are open to applicants to receive the information they need, a dedicated email and phone line service is provided by SUSI for Oireachtas members. This was established to meet an identified need for applicants who choose to engage the assistance of their public representatives in making enquiries about their grant applications. If the enquiries may be emailed direct to SUSI [oireachtas@susi.ie](mailto:oireachtas@susi.ie). Staff in SUSI are responding to email queries within a matter of days.

### Education and Training Provision

610. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the situation of a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9655/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Universities and institutes of technology are academically independent and have the right to determine the procedures and criteria for the selection and admission of students. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on behalf of the higher education institutions. Neither I nor my Department have a role in the operation of the CAO, and it is not within my remit to intervene in the admissions process.

Admissions under the alternative routes and schemes, including places for applications under further to higher education access routes are also regulated by the institutions themselves and not by my Department. Each higher education institution determines its own admission policy, the number of places they reserve for these routes and the allocation of those places. Further information for applicants presenting QQI FET/FETAC awards for higher education entry purposes, and information on the places available in nursing in particular, can be found on the CAO's website at the following link: [www.cao.ie/index.php?page=scoring&s=fetac](http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=scoring&s=fetac)

In both 2020 and 2021, additional places were made available on a range of higher education courses, including around 200 additional places on nursing and midwifery courses in 2021. My officials are currently engaging with the Higher Education Authority and representatives from the higher education sector on the provision of additional places for the coming academic year. It is the intention that there will be a focus on areas such as healthcare where there is a need for more skilled graduates, including in nursing.

In the longer term, the Programme for Government commits the Department of Health to working with the education sectors, regulators, and professional bodies to improve the availability of health professionals and reform their training to support integrated care across the entire health service.

My officials are actively engaging with the Department of Health on determining the longer term skills needs of the healthcare services, and the role which the further and higher education sector can play in meeting those skills needs.

### **Further and Higher Education**

611. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the reason that the redevelopment of the dental school in University College Cork has not progressed, despite launching its redevelopment in 2019; his plans to progress this redevelopment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9760/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In 2019, my Department launched a call under the Higher Education Strategic Infrastructure Fund (HESIF) for key strategic projects to be co-funded by the Exchequer. At that time University College Cork (UCC) prioritised an application for a new building, the Cork University Business School (CUBS) to be funded. The CUBS application was successful and approved in principle for funding of €25m under the HESIF call.

I have recently announced a second HESIF call for applications for major HE capital projects. The prioritisation of projects is again a matter for each higher education institution. It is open to UCC to submit an application for the Dental School under this programme call.

### **Further and Higher Education**

612. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there are only an estimated 60 dental graduates per year; his views on whether this is sufficient to meet the demands of dental patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9761/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** There is no quota placed on dental courses by my Department, and therefore

the places offered are a matter for the higher education institutions, in line with their autonomy. However due to the high level of practical work involved there are material constraints on the number of students that can be accepted onto dentistry courses.

My Department is strongly committed to supporting the health of the population through the provision of graduates with the key competencies and skills to be effective in the health workforce, and support a range of clinical teams in our health services.

The Programme for Government commits the Department of Health to working with the education sectors, regulators, and professional bodies to improve the availability of health professionals and reform their training to support integrated care across the entire health service.

My officials are actively engaging with the Department of Health on determining the longer term skills needs of the healthcare services, and the role which the further and higher education sector can play in meeting those skills needs. I will ensure that there is continued engagement with all stakeholders to ensure that we deliver graduates with the skills necessary to support our healthcare system and support the strategic workforce planning by the health sector.

### **Education and Training Provision**

613. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the regional breakdown of the network of regional skills fora; and the contact details for the forum managers. [9786/22]

614. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the recent engagements between the network of regional skills fora in relation to foreign direct investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9787/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 613 and 614 together.

Ireland places central importance on skills policy and human capital development. Ireland has an advanced system of skills provision, across Further and Higher Education, lifelong learning and human capital development, which is agile and responsive to changes in the world of work, in order to address evolving skills needs. As outlined in the 2021 National Economic Recovery Plan, skills and human capital are important elements in Ireland's broader labour market and economic policy approach, and in allowing Ireland to compete on an international stage and for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

The National Skills Council (NSC) and nine Regional Skills Fora (RSF), created under the National Skills Strategy, foster engagement and collaboration between enterprise and the education and training system, and relevant Government Departments and agencies. In developing our skills policy, this partnership approach, including with the enterprise agencies such as IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, is key.

IDA Ireland is represented on each of the Regional Skills Fora. Where needed, the RSF managers work closely with IDA Ireland to address the skills needs of their client companies, including talent attraction and retention and upskilling / reskilling needs of existing employees. Engagement, where relevant, also takes the form of (a) individual IDA client companies being referred to the RSF managers to undertake skills analysis and facilitate introductions with relevant regional education and training providers; (b) IDA Ireland representation on a range of RSF led steering groups/clusters and participation in sectoral studies in collaboration with

the RSF managers, for example in areas such as cybersecurity, manufacturing and engineering.

Looking forward, the OECD Skills Strategy Project, which I launched in November, will greatly assist my Department in its examination of our National Skills Strategy and approach - in order to ensure that we have a solid foundation on which to build Ireland's competitiveness and support economic and social sustainability into the future. The RSF are a key engagement platform throughout the OECD project, leveraging their existing networks to engage with large and small enterprises across Ireland and to ensure alignment at regional and national level in relation to skills issues.

Regarding the breakdown of the Regional Skills Fora network, the RSF cover the following nine regions:

Dublin – Dublin

Mid East – Kildare, Meath, Wicklow

Mid West – Clare, Limerick, Tipperary (North)

Midlands – Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath

North East – Cavan, Louth, Monaghan

North West – Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo

South East – Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary (South), Waterford, Wexford

South West – Cork, Kerry

West – Galway, Mayo, Roscommon

Contact information for each Regional Skills Fora manager is provided below.

Dublin – Natasha Kinsella ([natashakinsella@regionalskills.ie](mailto:natashakinsella@regionalskills.ie))

Mid East – Siobhán Keogh ([siobhankeogh@regionalskills.ie](mailto:siobhankeogh@regionalskills.ie))

Mid West – Joe Leddin ([joeleddin@regionalskills.ie](mailto:joeleddin@regionalskills.ie))

Midlands – John Costello ([jcostello@regionalskills.ie](mailto:jcostello@regionalskills.ie))

North East – Ray Murphy ([raymurphy@regionalskills.ie](mailto:raymurphy@regionalskills.ie))

North West – Hilary McPartland ([hilarymcpartland@regionalskills.ie](mailto:hilarymcpartland@regionalskills.ie))

South East – Edmond Connolly ([edmondconnolly@regionalskills.ie](mailto:edmondconnolly@regionalskills.ie))

South West – Siobhan Bradley ([siobhanbradley@regionalskills.ie](mailto:siobhanbradley@regionalskills.ie))

West – Denise Rocks ([deniserocks@regionalskills.ie](mailto:deniserocks@regionalskills.ie))

*Question No. 614 answered with Question No. 613.*

*Question No. 615 answered with Question No. 608.*

## **Grant Payments**

616. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will increase the income threshold to qualify for the special rate of maintenance grant for the 2021-2022 academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9858/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The income limit for the special rate of grant is aligned to the maximum point of the weekly State Contributory Pension plus the maximum Qualified Adult Allowance for a person over 66 years. The student grant means test for 2022 is based on gross reckonable income for the 2021 tax year. As the Department of Social Protection state pension payment was not increased in Budget 2021, the special rate income threshold remains at €24,500 for the 2022 Scheme. The income threshold for the special rate of grant is strategically aligned with the highest Department of Social Protection rate as described in order to target students from households in receipt of long term social welfare assistance effectively. However, the special rate of grant payment itself was increased by €200 as part of Budget 2022, along with all other student grant rates. For the 2022/23 academic year, the special rate of grant is payable at the non-adjacent rate of €6,115 or the adjacent rate of €2,575, depending on the distance from ordinary residence to the college attended. Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Information on the fund is available through the Access Officer in the third level institution attended. The fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis. In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie).

### **Climate Action Plan**

617. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when he envisages his Department will establish a climate action unit; the reason for the delay in establishing the unit, considering the fact that retrofitting will be key focus in climate action; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9891/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** A Capital Planning and Climate Change unit was established within my Department in September 2021. The Unit is responsible for coordination of the overall Departmental approach to Climate Action Plan implementation including supporting inter-Departmental and whole of Government work in this area.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

618. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9932/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the Further Education and Training Act (2013), SOLAS has statutory responsibility for planning, funding, and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET)

in Ireland.

While The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021 -2025 plan sets out actions to provide for craft apprentices to express preferences on the location of their off-the-job training. The offer of an off-the-job training place will be dependent on a number of factors such as demand for a specific location and available spaces.

SOLAS has taken a number of practical steps to enhance communications with apprentices during 2020 and 2021. A clear and coherent apprentice communications strategy will be developed by SOLAS to ensure that apprentices are aware of the route through which communication will take place, including the availability of both on-the-job and off-the-job supports available to address any issues arising during the period of apprenticeship.

Craft apprentices' ownership of their education and training journey will be enhanced through supporting choice in the location and timing of off-the-job training for craft apprentices.

Regarding the persons whose details were supplied, my Departments officials have engaged with SOLAS on behalf of Deputy Michael Healy-Rae and have requested SOLAS to engage directly with the individual concerned.

### **Departmental Communications**

619. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he uses an application on his official Government telephone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9961/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I do have the application referred to by the Deputy. However, I do not use it for official Government business.

### **Education and Training Boards**

620. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if persons employed by education and training boards (details supplied) will receive increments and pension entitlements in respect of their employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9972/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) provides funding to higher and further education institutions for the delivery of key services and supports for students with disabilities. It aims to support the personal, educational and professional development of the participating students. While historically administered by the Higher Education Authority, responsibility for the Fund in the further education and training sector transferred to SOLAS during 2020. SOLAS provides FSD funding to the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) who manage the funding allocations to PLC further education providers for services and accommodations required to support students with disabilities. Funding can be used to provide a range of supports and accommodations including non-medical helpers such as personal assistants and notetakers.

Need assessments determine the supports and accommodations requested for students and the individual ETB/ further education college is responsible for decisions on the most appro-

priate support to meet the needs of the student, in accordance with the guidelines issued by SOLAS.

As noted in the SOLAS Guidelines, where an ETB or further education college employs personnel to deliver supports to individual students, responsibility for the terms of employment rests with the individual ETB/ further education college.

### Research Funding

621. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of research centres funded by Science Foundation Ireland in 2021; and the Budget 2022 allocation for same. [10071/22]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The SFI Research Centres are funded on a multi annual basis. During 2021 there were 16 SFI Research Centres in receipt of funding through the SFI Research Centres Programme. These are set out below along with the projected allocations for those Research Centres in 2022.

SFI Research Centres do receive funding through other SFI programmes. The attached table reflects the core funding through the SFI Research Centres Programme.

SFI Research Centre	SFI Research Centre Programme Award	2022 Allocation
BiOrbic, SFI Bioeconomy Research Centre	15,021,703.00	484,416.75
FutureNeuro, The SFI Research Centre for Chronic and Rare Neurological Diseases	10,337,285.00	1,556,927.00
Confirm, SFI Research Centre for Smart Manufacturing	32,171,331.00	4,680,939.00
I-FORM, The SFI Research Centre for Advanced Manufacturing	15,709,451.00	1,803,122.90
VistaMilk, SFI Research Centre for Digitalising Dairy Production and Processing	25,629,333.00	4,904,787.00
APC, APC Microbiome Ireland SFI Research Centre	34,251,344.00	5,674,797.00
Insight, SFI Research Centre for Data Analytics	63,628,806.00	11,820,281.00
SSPC, SFI Research Centre for Pharmaceuticals	29,973,083.00	3,001,646.00
AMBER, SFI Research Centre for Advanced Materials and BioEngineering Research	51,895,011.00	9,684,959.60
IPIC, SFI Research Centre	26,639,181.00	2,739,418.00
MaREI, SFI Research Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine	25,029,197.00	5,117,637.00
ADAPT, SFI Research Centre for AI-driven Digital Content Technology	42,090,078.00	7,497,891.00

SFI Research Centre	SFI Research Centre Programme Award	2022 Allocation
Lero, SFI Research Centre for Software	37,449,510.00	6,267,699.00
Connect, SFI Research Centre for Future Networks and Communications	38,864,909.00	3,535,858.50
CÚRAM, SFI Research Centre for Medical Devices	46,372,380.00	6,961,648.36
ICRAG, SFI Research Centre in Applied Geosciences (iCRAG)	28,273,066.00	2,722,348.55

### Naturalisation Applications

622. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the procedure to be followed to obtain a copy or have a certificate of naturalisation reissued in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9079/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** My Department does not re-issue replacement certificates of naturalisation. However, a statement to the effect that the person was granted Irish citizenship can be issued if requested.

Any person requiring such a statement can download the relevant questionnaire at [1p9fz05mazr28icdhq6jweym-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Questionnaire-Form-Lost-Cert.pdf](http://1p9fz05mazr28icdhq6jweym-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Questionnaire-Form-Lost-Cert.pdf) and fill in the details and return it to the address on the form along with the following required documents:

- a copy of long form birth certificate and certified translation if not in English;
- a copy of marriage certificate (if applicable) and certified translation if not in English;
- a copy of the bio-metric page of their current passport; and
- a police report as evidence that the loss of the certificate of naturalisation has been reported to the relevant police authority.

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

### Peace Commissioners

623. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Justice the number of peace commissioners that are currently appointed in County Kilkenny; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9082/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Peace Commissioners are appointed by the Minister for Justice under Section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act, 1924. Peace Commissioners are empowered to act in their county of appointment and within the counties adjoining that county.

According to my Department's records, there are 93 Peace Commissioners currently appointed in County Kilkenny (as of 17 February 2022).

The Department maintains a Roll of Peace Commissioners. While every effort is made to maintain its accuracy, it should be noted that Peace Commissioner records are appointment-based and do not always reflect the actual situation on the ground. This is because the Department is reliant on the Peace Commissioners themselves and other interested parties to advise of changes in circumstances which may occur subsequent to an appointment.

Individuals requesting the services of a Peace Commissioner are advised to contact their local Garda station to ensure that a particular listed individual is active and available. The details of appointed Peace Commissioners are also retained by the Peace Commissioner Unit in my Department and officials are pleased to assist individuals who require the services of a Peace Commissioner. They can be contacted by email at [PeaceCommissioners@justice.ie](mailto:PeaceCommissioners@justice.ie) or by telephone at (01) 8592323.

### **International Agreements**

624. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to ratify the second optional protocol of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the details of the outstanding issues that need to be resolved by the Government to enable ratification. [9097/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Government continues to be strongly committed to the ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A number of significant pieces of legislation had to be passed to ensure that Ireland is in compliance with the obligations of the Optional Protocol. The enactment of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 and the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 constituted key steps on the pathway to the ratification of the Optional Protocol.

My Department continues to engage with the Office of the Attorney General to determine whether a small number of additional legislative measures may be required to ensure that the State is compliant with all of the extra-territorial jurisdiction requirements under Article 3.1 of the Protocol. As noted previously to the Deputy, officials are considering advices and, if further legislative amendments are considered necessary, I will bring those forward at the earliest opportunity.

### **Nursing Homes**

625. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice the number of files related to allegations of sexual, physical, psychological, financial, institutional abuse or neglect of residents living in nursing homes or disabilities centres which have been received by Office of Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, since 2015; the number of files which resulted in a decision to prosecute by type of crime; the number of subsequent successful prosecutions which resulted from a decision to prosecute by type of crime; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9106/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will appreciate, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) is an independent law officer under the Prosecution of Offences Act 1974 (as amended) and I have no role in the Office of the DPP and I am unable to

comment on files received by the DPP, or on prosecutions brought by that office.

In relation to the outcomes of prosecutions, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions, which include the provision of information on the courts system.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, officials from my Department have made enquiries and the Courts Service has said that prosecutions are against alleged perpetrators and by offences. The Courts Service cannot identify classes of victims or categorise the location of offences.

For the Deputy's information, the Courts Service provides a dedicated email address for the provision of information to members of the Houses of the Oireachtas oireachtasenquiries@courts.ie.

### **Child Protection**

626. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice if there ever been a prosecution of a person under the Withholding of Information on Offences against Children and Vulnerable Persons Act 2012 (details supplied); if so, if she will provide statistical information relating to the cases; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9107/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will appreciate, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) is an independent law officer under the Prosecution of Offences Act 1974 (as amended) and I have no role in respect of the Office of the DPP.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, officials from my Department have made enquiries with An Garda Síochána. I'm informed that a key word search was carried out on 22/02/2022 for charges and summonses which contained the terms "withholding" and "vulnerable".

No results were found which related to Withholding of Information on Offences against Children and Vulnerable Persons Act 2012.

PULSE figures are operational and liable to change.

Under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions, which include the provision of information on the courts system.

For the Deputy's information, the Courts Service provides a dedicated email address for the provision of information to members of the Houses of the Oireachtas oireachtasenquiries@courts.ie.

### **Departmental Data**

627. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of offences committed against women contrary to each of the sections 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 15 of the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997 in each of the years 2010 to 2021 and to date in 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9124/22]

628. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of offences committed

against women contrary to each of the sections 2, 3, and 4 of the Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act 1990 in each of the years 2010 2021 and to date in 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9125/22]

629. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of homicides against women for each of the years from 2010 to 2021 and to date in 2022; the total number of homicides for the same time period; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9126/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 627 to 629, inclusive, together.

It has not been possible to obtain the information requested by the Deputy in the timeframe permitted. Once this information is received I will write to the Deputy.

*Question No. 628 answered with Question No. 627.*

*Question No. 629 answered with Question No. 627.*

### **Community Development Projects**

630. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Justice the new criteria for community groups when applying for a lottery licence (detail supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9128/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** As the Deputy will be aware, my Department is not in a position to interpret the law as passed by the Oireachtas.

The Gaming and Lotteries (Amendment) Act 2019 commenced on 1 December 2020, with all sections coming into effect. The 2019 Act modernises the Gaming and Lotteries Act 1956 and helps the better promotion of local gaming and lottery activity.

The process whereby a charitable or philanthropic organisation can apply to the District Court for a lottery licence is set out in the new Section 28 of the Gaming and Lotteries Act 1956, as inserted by the Gaming and Lotteries (Amendment) Act 2019.

Applications for lottery licences should be made to the District Court of the district in which it is proposed to promote the lottery, authorising the person to conduct periodical lotteries in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

The application should be made not less than 60 days before the first day on which it is intended to promote the lottery. This period was intended to ensure that the court is provided with sufficient notice and full details of the proposed lottery activity so as to determine the application.

The current fee payable on application to a District Court for a Lottery Licence is €150.

The District Court to which the application is made, may seek further information from the applicant including in relation to the proposed conduct of the lottery, the premises where the lottery is promoted from and the availability of prizes.

The promotion of the lottery must comply with all of the conditions set out in Section 28 of the Act.

Matters relating to the issuance of lottery licences by the District Court, including applica-

tion forms under Section 28, are set out in revised Order 66 of the Rules of the District Court, SI No. 63/2021 (District Court (Gaming and Lotteries) Rules 2021).

On the commencement of the Act on 1 December 2020, my Department placed advertisements in 35 regional papers, including the Anglo Celt and the Longford Leader, and information notes and a detailed press release were published on my Department's website.

### **Naturalisation Applications**

631. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if the original certificate of naturalisation will be reissued in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9136/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The certificate of naturalisation for the person referred to by the Deputy was sent by my Department by registered post on 14 July 2021 to the address held on file. Tracking records indicate that it was delivered on 15 July 2021 at 10.30am.

My Department has advised the person concerned to contact An Post to query the issue. If their follow up with An Post proves unsuccessful, they will need to report the missing certificate of naturalisation to An Garda Síochána and provide my Department with a report.

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

### **Departmental Reviews**

632. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline for the Interdepartmental Review of the Atypical Work Permit Scheme for Non-European Economic Area (Non-EEA) Fishers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9138/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** A review of the Atypical Working Scheme for non-EEA fishers is being carried out by officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and my own Department.

As part of the review, stakeholders involved, or with an interest, in the scheme, including relevant Government Departments and agencies, employer groups, solicitors representing applicants, the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and others were invited to make submissions by 2 February 2022. A number of submissions have been received and are being assessed by the Review Group who are preparing their report on that basis.

The review remains ongoing and is expected to be completed by the end of March.

### **Human Trafficking**

633. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number of identified vic-

tims of human trafficking in the State in 2021; the purpose of their trafficking, that is, for labour exploitation and sex work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9139/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Human trafficking is a heinous crime based on deception and exploitation of vulnerable people. Combatting it is, and will continue to be, a priority for this Government.

An Garda Síochána has committed significant resources to the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking in Ireland. A specialised Garda Unit, the Human Trafficking Investigation and Co-ordination Unit (HTICU), has been in place since 2009 to conduct investigations into human trafficking. It also provides advice, support and where necessary, operational assistance to investigations at district level. An Garda Síochána is also active in relation to trafficking gangs through work targeting organised crime - targeting their finances, their use of the internet and by working closely with other jurisdictions.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the following table shows the number of identified victims of human trafficking in the State in 2021 and the reason for their trafficking.

Category	Total	Female	Male	Children
Sex trafficking	25	24	1	0
Forced labour	19	4	15	0
Forced criminality	0	0	0	0
Unspecified exploitation	0	0	0	0
Total	44	28	16	0

I can assure the Deputy that this Government is serious about preventing and prosecuting for human trafficking, and committed to supporting those that are victims of it. We are confident that the victim-centred policy approach we are taking will encourage more victims to come forward and access supports and that this will, in turn, strengthen prosecutions and convictions.

Last year Government approved proposals to revise the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) to make it easier for victims of trafficking to come forward, be identified and access advice, accommodation and support.

The revised NRM will provide for all agencies, both State and civil society, to co-operate, share information about potential victims, identify those victims and facilitate their access to advice, accommodation and support.

The new approach acknowledges various state bodies and NGOs have a role in identifying victims of human trafficking and referring them to the NRM.

We want to be sure that every victim of trafficking is identified and helped so we can support them. Doing this will also help us gather more information and evidence in order to bring to justice the traffickers who prey on vulnerable people with no regard for the lives and safety of their victims.

In addition, the development of a new National Action Plan on human trafficking is taking place. A consultant has produced a short and focussed analysis of the current position in relation to human trafficking in Ireland. The analysis includes a research review, a synopsis of the extent of trafficking in Ireland and a summary of issues to address.

The Department of Justice is now engaged with a working group to draft the new National Action Plan high-level goals and outcomes.

## Flexible Work Practices

634. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice if a person (details supplied) is entitled to continue to work from home due to their circumstances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9188/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, consultations on the Civil Service Blended Working framework are at final stages. The proposed framework sets out a number of core principles to apply to blended working across the Civil Service post-COVID, embracing opportunities for blended working arrangements, to build a more dynamic, agile and responsive Civil Service, while sustaining strong standards of performance and high levels of productivity.

Similar to our colleagues across the Civil Service, the Department of Justice is developing its own blended working policy and once agreed, we will start to embed a Blended Working policy for the Department which we will review regularly and adapt as we charter our way to develop new ways of working which will increase flexibility, support the diverse needs of our workforce, improve health and wellbeing and enhance work-life balance.

In light of the most recent Government announcement on January 21, a phased return to offices for those staff who have been working from home began on Monday 7 February, 2022.

I hope the Deputy will appreciate that my Department cannot comment on individual cases.

## An Garda Síochána

635. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Justice if a tendering competition was carried out for the design and supply of the new operational uniform for An Garda Síochána; if so, the details of the successful tenderer; the breakdown of the cost of the outsourced work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9195/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy is aware, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. As Minister, I have no direct role in the matter.

I can confirm that there was a tender process for the contract to provide the new Garda Uniforms. I am advised by the Garda authorities that the contract was awarded to James Boylan Safety Ltd.

I have sought further information from An Garda Síochána with regard to the Deputy's further questions but did not receive it in time. I will write to the Deputy with the information when I have received it.

## Prison Service

636. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the changes made by the Irish Prison Service since 2010 to ensure full compliance with the Bangkok Rules; and when a review was last carried out to ensure this was the case.; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9213/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** While the Bangkok Rules, adopted by

the United Nations in 2010, are the first international instrument to provide guidelines on responding to the gender specific needs of women in the criminal justice system, the Irish Prison Service has long been conscious of the particular needs of women in the prison system. The IPS recognises women as a particularly vulnerable group with very different needs to male offenders and is working constantly to address those needs, including by reference to the Bangkok Rules.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Dóchas Centre is the principal location for the accommodation of female prisoners in the State. The ethos under which Dóchas operates is that the women live together in a community-style setting, accommodated in houses rather than cell block. The regime focuses on training and rehabilitation, including access to mental health services, psychology service and addiction counsellors.

My officials in the Irish Prison Service report that communal dining is available to women prisoners in certain areas in Limerick Prison but that prisoners are permitted to dine in by themselves or with their cell mate. In the Dóchas Centre the women are accommodated in houses rather than cell blocks and most prefer to dine in their houses and rather than communally.

The new specially designed accommodation block for women offenders in Limerick, which will replace the use of the female wing at that prisons, is expected to be completed and become operational in the latter half of this year. The design of the new facility is centred on the principle of rehabilitation and normalisation, reflecting contemporary design standards. A mix of accommodation units is being provided based around an external courtyard setting and the development will provide accommodation for 50 female prisoners.

I understand that staff working with women in prison are provided with specialist training and in February 2020 the Prison Service introduced a new tailored programme for staff to address the special needs of women prisoners. To enhance the rehabilitative opportunities, a new programme called the Outlook Programme, which is a step down unit for women offenders, was opened in 2019 in partnership with the Probation Service. The project is managed by Focus Ireland and the vision of the programme is to promote the rehabilitation and re-integration of women leaving prison, in particular those who have accommodation needs requiring support in the community.

Privacy is afforded to all prisoners for various activities, where appropriate, including phone calls and contact with their children. The Prison Service is acutely aware of the importance of assisting prisoners to maintain close contact with their children while in custody. The Deputy will be aware that 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. Regrettably, this included the suspension of physical visits to prisoners for extended periods of time.

The Deputy will be aware that following a short two week suspension physical visits recommenced in all prisons on Monday 24 January and prisoners are entitled to receive one physical visit per fortnight. In addition, from 14 February the number of persons permitted to visit a prisoner increased to three persons, of whom two may be a child (under 18 years of age). Visits will continue to be subject to infection control measures including the wearing of face masks.

The Prison Service introduced a new video visit system to ensure that prisoners could continue to have visual contact with their families throughout this time.

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

## Visa Applications

637. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the two-month visa process in relation to vulnerable Ukrainian family members of Irish citizens to travel to Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9301/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** My Department is currently working to ensure that it can assist Irish citizens and their family members in Ukraine speedily and with flexibility. While Ukrainian nationals are not visa exempt to enter Ireland, I can assure the Deputy that, given the current circumstances, all visa applications will be dealt with as quickly and as humanely as possible.

This approach will include visa applications for non EEA family members of Irish citizens, which will be processed swiftly.

Officials in my Department are working with colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs on an ongoing basis on this issue.

## Misuse of Drugs

638. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the actions being undertaken by An Garda Síochána to tackle crystal methamphetamine. [9407/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, tackling drug dealing and organised criminal activity is a key priority for the Government and for An Garda Síochána. Under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 (as amended), the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including operational decisions and the deployment of resources to address drug crime. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters.

Methylamphetamine is a controlled drug as per the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 to 2015. I am advised by the Garda authorities that the usage of Methylamphetamine in Ireland at this time is quite low, resulting in a low volume of seizures. In line with the National Drug and Alcohol Strategy 2017 - 2025, *Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery*, An Garda Síochána, along with its partner agency, the Revenue Commissioners Customs Service, continues to target Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) involved in the illegal import, export, and sale and supply of controlled drugs, including Methylamphetamine, in this jurisdiction.

Under Action 3.2.36 of the National Drug and Alcohol Strategy 2017 - 2025, An Garda Síochána and Revenue Commissioners Customs Service are the lead agencies on an action relevant to monitoring drug markets, new drug markets, and both the surface and dark web. I am advised that An Garda Síochána are represented on the Early Warning and Emerging Trends Sub Committee, which advises government on new psychoactive substances, emerging trends and practices and the consequences of such drug use. This group is led by the Department of Health in association with the European Monitoring Centre for Drug and Drugs Addiction (EMCDDA).

I am assured by the Garda authorities that An Garda Síochána will continue to monitor drug trends in line with the EU Early Warning System and will consider the implications of any new or existing trend in the Irish drug market, including Methylamphetamine.

## Citizenship Applications

639. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in respect of a citizenship application by a person (details supplied) in which an additional requirement of Garda vetting is required; the impact this process has had on the application to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9552/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will appreciate, the responsibility to ensure that the correct information required for eVetting is provided to the Garda National Vetting Bureau (GNVB) rests with the applicant.

Having to complete a second eVetting application will result in minimal delay with regard to the overall processing of the application for a certificate of naturalisation and the void eVetting application will have no negative impact on the the application.

The person concerned can track the progress of their eVetting application at National Vetting Bureau (garda.ie)

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

### **Prison Service**

640. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Justice the status of an application for a transfer by a person (details supplied) under the 1983 Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons; and if she will expedite the application. [9556/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I am advised by officials in the Irish Prison Service that correspondence was received on behalf of the person referred to, for a transfer to a prison in this jurisdiction, under the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons.

In accordance with the Convention, the collation of documents in respect of all applications must be prepared by the sentencing state and issued to the appropriate receiving state.

On foot of a request from officials in the Irish Prison Service to the sentencing state authorities, the necessary paperwork pursuant to such applications was subsequently received by email on Monday 21 February.

My officials have begun processing the application in accordance with the provisions of the Acts. The Deputy will appreciate that applications of this nature are complex and require legal advice, but I can advise the Deputy that all applications are progressed as quickly as is possible. Furthermore, each application received is dealt with on it's own merits.

All such requests are decided upon following the collation of a number of reports from various agencies setting out the consequences of such a transfer. The consent of all three parties in the process is required prior to any transfer, i.e. the sentencing state, the receiving state and the sentenced person.

The Deputy should be aware that the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons does not confer an automatic right on any prisoner to be transferred nor does it

confer an obligation on any state to comply with a transfer request.

### **Departmental Advertising**

641. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Justice the amount that her Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9579/22]

650. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9837/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 641 and 650 together.

In relation to the amount spent on advertising and features I can confirm the Department of Justice placed advertisements to the value of €1,875 in 2020, and €1,906 in 2021 in Public Sector Magazine.

In 2020 Public Sector Magazine awarded the Department of Justice the *Campaign Of The Year Award* for work combatting sexual harassment with the No Excuses campaign.

In 2021 the Department was awarded the *Excellence In Services To The Community Award* for work to help victims and vulnerable witnesses in sexual violence cases by the same publication.

I can also inform the Deputy that my Department has since clarified its policy that paid advertising should only be undertaken for the purpose of providing public information or raising awareness of a matter of public concern.

### **Prison Service**

642. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice when she received the section 31(2) report submitted to her Department by the Chief Inspector of Prisons on the Mountjoy Women's Prison, Dóchas Centre; when she plans to publish the report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9611/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Office of the Inspector of Prisons is a statutory body, independent in how it carries out its work, set up under the Prisons Act 2007. The Inspector's key role is to carry out regular inspections of prisons.

The Inspector was asked to carry out an investigation into matters arising in the Dóchas Centre, under section 31(2) of the Prisons Act. The Inspector submitted this report to the Minister on the 15 February 2022 and it is currently being examined by my officials.

### **Road Traffic Offences**

643. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice the total number of uninsured motorists apprehended by An Garda Síochána in each of the years 2017 to 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9638/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have requested the information sought

by the Deputy from An Garda Síochána, but I have not received this information in time. I will write to the Deputy as soon as the information is to hand.

### Fines Administration

644. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice the total number of fines issued to uninsured motorists per year in each of the years 2017 to 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9639/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Central Statistics Office (CSO), as the national statistical agency, is responsible for the compilation and publication of all crime statistics. The CSO produces these statistics using data recorded on An Garda Síochána's PULSE system and makes regular releases under reservation in relation to various crime statistics. The CSO also continues to work with An Garda Síochána to address quality issues in the underlying sources used to compile the statistics.

For the Deputy's information, statistics regarding the total number of fines issued to uninsured motorists are publicly available at the following link:

[www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rcd/recordedcrimedetection2020/fixedpaymentoffences/](http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rcd/recordedcrimedetection2020/fixedpaymentoffences/)

To be of assistance, the following table outlines the number of Fixed Payment offences issued by An Garda Síochána for no insurance in the years 2017 - 2020. I am advised by the CSO that figures for 2021 are not yet available and are usually published in the fourth quarter of each year.

2017	2018	2019	2020
7312	7606	7071	6791

### Penalty Points System

645. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice the total number convictions issued to uninsured motorists in each of the years 2017 to 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9640/22]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The number of penalty points issued to uninsured motorists in each of the years 2017 to 2021 is provided in the table below.

Offence	Year	Number of Penatly Point Endorsement Notices issued	Number of Penatly Points Applied
No Insurance (user)	2017	4,082	20,410
No Insurance (user)	2018	4,498	22,490
No Insurance (user)	2019	4,334	21,670
No Insurance (user)	2020	2,420	12,100
No Insurance (user)	2021	3,311	16,555

### Road Traffic Offences

646. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice the total number of vehicles

seized per year by An Garda Síochána after the driver was found to be driving without insurance in each of the years 2017 to 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9641/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible by law for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including operational policing matters. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

The table below, provided to me by the Garda authorities, outlines a yearly breakdown of the numbers of incidents in which a vehicle was seized under Section 41 of the Road Traffic Act for reason of driving without insurance.

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
23,697	21,219	19,104	18,209	12,934

I am advised that the above figures are based on incidents which occurred from 01/01/2017 to 31/12/2021, inclusive. The Deputy will appreciate that these figures are based upon operational data from the Pulse system as was available on 21/02/2022 and are liable to change.

### Road Traffic Offences

647. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice the total number of uninsured vehicles which have been identified by An Garda Síochána using the automatic number-plate recognition system to date; the total number of fines issued to those motorists; the total number of convictions; the total number of vehicles seized; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9642/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee) (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy is aware, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions, which include the provision of information on the courts system.

I have contacted the Courts Service and have been provided with the below table, which outlines the number of offences and persons for no insurance where convictions were recorded for the period 2017 – 2021; and the number & value of fines imposed for no insurance for the period 2017 – 2021.

The Deputy will appreciate that the Courts Service can only provide data in relation to where offence codes provided on the system were used by prosecutors. Prosecutors may have used uncoded free text offences and any such offences would not be included in the data provided.

### The number of offences and persons convicted for no insurance recorded for the period 2017 – 2021

Year	No of offences where convictions were recorded	No of persons convicted
Jan - Dec 2017	11,948	9,957
Jan - Dec 2018	12,663	10,502
Jan - Dec 2019	12,636	10,256
Jan - Dec 2020	7,493	6,283
Jan - Dec 2021	10,144	8,408
Total	54,884	45,406

**The number and value of fines imposed for no insurance for the period 2017 – 2021**

Year	No of fines imposed	Value of fines imposed
Jan - Dec 2017	9,355	€3,513,081.00
Jan - Dec 2018	9,862	€3,595,160.35
Jan - Dec 2019	9,246	€3,421,182.00
Jan - Dec 2020	5,513	€1,961,883.00
Jan - Dec 2021	7,547	€2,836,492.00
Total	41,523	€15,327,798.35

I have requested the information sought by the Deputy in relation to the total number of uninsured vehicles which have been identified by An Garda Síochána using the automatic number-plate recognition system for the years 2017 up to 2021; and the total number of vehicles seized during the same period from the Garda authorities. I will forward it as soon as the information is to hand.

**Road Traffic Offences**

648. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice the average hourly and daily number of uninsured vehicles that are identified by An Garda Síochána through the use of the automatic number-plate recognition system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9643/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 (as amended), the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

I am informed the Garda authorities that Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) was first introduced by the Garda authorities in 2008 and is used on a daily basis to assist in the prevention and detection of crime on our roads network. I am further informed that the uninsured watch list on the ANPR system has been live since 12 July 2019, and records are available on the ANPR system since that date.

I am advised that since 12 July 2019, an average of 128 uninsured vehicles have been identified by An Garda Síochána per day through the use of ANPR which is approximately 5 per hour over a twenty-four hour period.

The Deputy will appreciate that the values vary greatly depending on the time of day and the day of the week.

The tables below, which have been provided to me by the Garda authorities, set out the average number of uninsured vehicles detected on the ANPR System on both a daily and hourly basis.

**Daily breakdown**

Day	Daily Average
Monday	133
Tuesday	136
Wednesday	140

Day	Daily Average
Thursday	139
Friday	143
Saturday	107
Sunday	100

### Hourly breakdown

This is the breakdown based on an average daily number of identified uninsured vehicles.

8am-11am	11am-2pm	2pm-5pm	5pm-8pm	8pm-8am
22	29	35	23	19

I am advised that the above figures are based on records from 12/07/2019 to 31/12/2021, inclusive. I am further advised that these figures are based upon operational data from the ANPR System as was available on 18/02/2022 and is liable to change.

### Departmental Funding

649. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Justice if the recent provision of additional security measures for Ministers included home alarm systems. [9768/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will appreciate, for policy and security reasons, my Department does not comment on matters of security. Therefore it would not be appropriate to share details of any measures that may be in place with regard to Ministerial security.

*Question No. 650 answered with Question No. 641.*

### International Protection

651. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons arriving in the State in each week to date in 2022 seeking international protection; the capacity of the system currently to accommodate these; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9898/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The International Protection Office (IPO) of my Department is responsible for examining all international protection applications received in the State.

The table below sets out the number of applications for international protection made at the IPO each week to date this year.

January	Number
Week ending Sunday 9 January	113
Week ending Sunday 16 January	112
Week ending Sunday 23 January	82
Week ending Sunday 30 January	71
February	

January	Number
Week ending 6 February	93
Week ending 13 February	205
Week ending 20 February	211
Total	887

Responsibility for the accommodation system for international protection applicants is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

### An Garda Síochána

652. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Justice if a crime can be reported to An Garda Síochána through its disability access officer; if not, the reason therefor; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9909/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible under the law for the management of An Garda Síochána, including operational matters. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters.

The appointment of Access Officers is covered under Section 26 of the Disability Act 2005. This section places a requirement on the head of a public body to “*authorise at least one of his or her officers to provide or arrange for and co-ordinate the provision of assistance and guidance to persons with disabilities in accessing its services*” .

I am informed by the Garda authorities that since the introduction of the Disability Act 2005, an Inspector, based in Garda Employee Relations, Garda HRM, Phoenix Park in Dublin, has been the nominated Access Officer for An Garda Síochána. I am advised that this is not a full time position and the nominated Inspector is the only Access Officer for An Garda Síochána under the Act.

Any person wishing to report a crime should contact their local Garda Station, or if it is an emergency, by dialling 999 or 112. For the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or speech-impaired, a crime can be reported by SMS text message on 112. However, the phone number must first be registered on the 112 SMS service and it must only be contacted in the event of an emergency.

I am advised that the Garda Access Officer is contactable by phone and by email, however both of these services are only available during business hours Monday to Friday.

I am further advised that where a member of the public contacts the Garda Access Officer to report a crime, they are put in contact with their local Garda Station who will have the resources available to follow up on the investigation of the crime. This will include arranging for any special provisions to allow the person engage with local investigating officers.

### Citizenship Applications

653. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9914/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to by the Deputy is currently being processed with a view to

establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible.

During this time, it is important that the person maintains their immigration permission and takes all appropriate steps to renew their permission to be in the State.

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

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

In addition, the combined impact of the 2019 High Court judgment in the Jones case and the necessary health restrictions arising from the pandemic, has unfortunately resulted in the processing time for standard applications increasing.

However, my Department is taking a number of steps to speed up the processing of applications and a number of digitisation measures have also been introduced to increase efficiency in the process, including eTax clearance, eVetting and online payments. The end result of the digitisation process will be to free up more staff to focus on processing applications in a timely and efficient manner, to improve service to our customers and reduce waiting times.

Last year, my Department made 11,512 citizenship decisions, the highest level achieved since 2015. Additional staff have also been assigned to the citizenship team. Based on these measures, my Department's objective is to achieve an improved timeframe of 6-9 months for decisions on a majority of applications during 2022.

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

### **Departmental Communications**

654. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Justice if she uses an application on her official Government telephone; if so, if she has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9964/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I wish to advise the Deputy that I have the application referenced on my official phone. I do not use the disappearing messages setting.

### **Residency Permits**

655. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice the reason an applicant (details supplied) for a stamp 5 was charged €300 when the application was signed at the immigration section at Ballyshannon Garda station; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9984/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The stamp 4 immigration permission of the person referred to by Deputy was previously based upon a Spouse of Irish National (SOIN) application. As a result, this person was exempt from paying the registration fee. However, the person concerned has now been granted a stamp 5 Without Condition as to Time (WCAT) permission and would, therefore, not be exempt from paying the fee.

As the Deputy will be aware, registrations for people living outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) through the Garda Station network.

If the person concerned wishes to query the basis for the payment of the registration fee, they can do so at their local immigration office.

### **An Garda Síochána**

656. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí who have been suspended from duty; and the length of time in years that they have been suspended, in tabular form. [10051/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from An Garda Síochána, but I have not received this information in time. I will write to the Deputy as soon as the information is to hand.

### **An Garda Síochána**

657. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of cases the Garda computer crime unit have dealt with in 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form. [10066/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from An Garda Síochána, but I have not received this information in time. I will write to the Deputy as soon as the information is to hand.

### **An Garda Síochána**

658. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of horsebox vehicles purchased for the Garda mounted unit in 2020 and 2021; the number of horsebox vehicles withdrawn from the fleet in 2020 and 2021; and if funding has been provided for the purchase of horsebox vehicles in 2022. [10067/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána as well as for decisions in relation to the allocation and management of Garda equipment and resources. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the Garda Mounted Unit is based at Áras an Uachtaráin, Phoenix Park, Dublin 8. The unit has a national remit under the direction and control of Assistant Commissioner, Organised and Serious Crime and the operational control of Chief Superintendent, Operational Support Services.

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I am advised by the Garda authorities that there are currently 6 horsebox trailers attached to the Garda Mounted Unit. I am further advised that no horsebox trailers were purchased in 2020 and one double horsebox trailer was purchased in 2021.

I am informed that no horsebox trailers have been withdrawn from service in 2020 or 2021 and that there are no plans to replace another horsebox unless a need arises.

### **An Garda Síochána**

659. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the monetary value of crack cocaine seized by gardaí in the Roscommon-Longford and Westmeath Garda divisions in 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form. [10068/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, tackling drug dealing and organised criminal activity is a key priority for the Government and for An Garda Síochána. Under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 (as amended), the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including operational decisions and the deployment of resources to address drug crime. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that confirmed information on types of drugs, and associated weights/volume and purity is only available following analysis by Forensic Science Ireland (FSI). I am further advised that FSI do not classify crack cocaine separately to other cocaine cases.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that it is also possible that seizures of substances suspected to be crack cocaine may be recorded on PULSE under the more generic term of “cocaine”.

As a result of these factors, I am advised by An Garda Síochána that it is not possible to give a response to this question.

Separately, the Deputy may be interested to know that drugs figures included in An Garda Síochána’s Annual Reports refer to the quantities of drugs analysed by FSI in each calendar year, rather than data recorded on PULSE for that year, and can be located at the link below:

[www.garda.ie/en/about-us/publications/annual%20reports/an-garda-siochana-annual-reports/](http://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/publications/annual%20reports/an-garda-siochana-annual-reports/)

### **An Garda Síochána**

660. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the reason An Garda Síochána has not provided all the requested files to Operation Kenova; and the reason for the delay in supplying all the relevant information to the inquiry in order that the victims and survivors can achieve justice. [10102/22]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy refers to Operation Kenova, which is one of a series of ongoing independent UK police investigations or reviews into Northern Ireland legacy cases that are collectively described as the Kenova cases and are headed up by former Chief Constable Jon Boutcher.

The Deputy will appreciate that cooperation by An Garda Síochána with Operation Kenova

is, of course, an operational matter and the Commissioner must take a number of factors into account. I can however inform the Deputy that there are arrangements in place which support the mutual co-operation, assistance and exchange of information between An Garda Síochána and the Operation Kenova Investigation Team and that engagement is ongoing at this time. The Historical Investigation Coordination Unit in An Garda Síochána continues to support this partnership. I am informed that Information has already been provided to the Investigation Team and the remaining requests on hand are under consideration at present.

I can further advise the Deputy of my continuing commitment to supporting An Garda Síochána in pursuing this work and in providing assistance to the greatest extent possible.

More generally, the Deputy will appreciate that dealing with the legacy of the troubles on this island is a difficult and complex task. The Stormont House Agreement sets out a framework to establish effective ways to address the legacy of the troubles and the Government remains committed to the implementation of those measures. The Government is engaged with the UK Government and the parties in Northern Ireland to seek a collective way forward. It is only through a collective approach that we can hope to deal with legacy issues comprehensively and fairly and in a way that is acceptable to victims and their families.

### Substance Misuse

661. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the actions being undertaken by his Department to tackle crystal methamphetamine. [9407/22]

760. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to an increase in the prevalence of crystal methamphetamine in the Dublin area; and the actions he is taking to tackle the issue. [9406/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 661 and 760 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, tackling drug dealing and organised criminal activity is a key priority for the Government and for An Garda Síochána. Under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 (as amended), the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including operational decisions and the deployment of resources to address drug crime. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters.

Methylamphetamine is a controlled drug as per the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 to 2015. I am advised by the Garda authorities that the usage of Methylamphetamine in Ireland at this time is quite low, resulting in a low volume of seizures. In line with the National Drug and Alcohol Strategy 2017 - 2025, *Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery*, An Garda Síochána, along with its partner agency, the Revenue Commissioners Customs Service, continues to target Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) involved in the illegal import, export, and sale and supply of controlled drugs, including Methylamphetamine, in this jurisdiction.

Under Action 3.2.36 of the National Drug and Alcohol Strategy 2017 - 2025, An Garda Síochána and Revenue Commissioners Customs Service are the lead agencies on an action relevant to monitoring drug markets, new drug markets, and both the surface and dark web. I am advised that An Garda Síochána are represented on the Early Warning and Emerging Trends Sub Committee, which advises government on new psychoactive substances, emerging trends and practices and the consequences of such drug use. This group is led by the Department of Health in association with the European Monitoring Centre for Drug and Drugs Addiction (EMCDDA).

I am assured by the Garda authorities that An Garda Síochána will continue to monitor drug trends in line with the EU Early Warning System and will consider the implications of any new or existing trend in the Irish drug market, including Methylamphetamine.

### **Ambulance Service**

662. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health the reason that it took an ambulance more than 70 minutes to respond to an accident (details supplied) in County Clare; his plans to limit any other similar delay occurring; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9043/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regarding the specific incident enclosed with the Deputy's question, as this is an operational matter for the National Ambulance Service (NAS), I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to him directly, as soon as possible.

More generally, I can confirm to the Deputy that the Government is committed to investing and building capacity resilience into the NAS. Last year €10 million of funding for new service developments provided for 125 additional whole time equivalents to provide for both increased frontline ambulance staffing and equipment capacity and for enhanced NAS community initiatives designed to reduce acute hospital attendances and improve patient experiences. This year out of an unprecedented total allocation of €200 million, a further €8.2 million is being invested in new developments which will help to build more capacity into the service.

Finally, the Deputy may wish to be aware that a new five-year NAS Strategic Plan is currently being finalised by the HSE. This plan, elements of which have been funded in Budget 2022, will be supported by the findings and recommendations of a National Demand and Capacity Analysis, which has been commissioned by the NAS to inform future capacity requirements and workforce planning to 2027. Work on the Analysis is currently ongoing.

### **Mental Health Services**

663. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if urgent assistance and treatment can be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9047/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** Any voluntary patient has the right to leave hospital at any time and/or consent to or refuse treatment. Detention of any person without consent is a serious matter that it can only happen in accordance with the law – in this case, the Mental Health Act 2001.

Where a person is in the community, the process of involuntary detention under the 2001 Act is a three-step process. The first step requires an application, (which can be made by a spouse or relative, an authorised officer, a member of An Garda Síochána or any other person, subject to conditions set out in section 9(2) of the Act), followed by a recommendation by a GP that the person is suffering from a mental disorder and would benefit from a period of treatment in hospital. The third step is the requirement that the consultant psychiatrist, following an assessment, diagnoses the person as suffering from a mental disorder within the meaning of section 3 of the Act, and authorises the involuntary admission of the person. Upon admission of a patient on an involuntary basis, a second examination by an independent consultant psychiatrist takes place to affirm or refuse the order.

It is also important to mention that in addition to the requirement to follow clear admission statutory procedures, the Act also gives every detained person the right to automatically have their involuntary admission reviewed. This means that such admissions must be reviewed by a Mental Health Tribunal made up of three independently appointed persons. If the Mental Health Tribunal believes that the procedures for involuntary admission followed the law and that the person is suffering from a mental disorder, their decision will be to affirm the admission or renewal order. If, however, the Mental Health Tribunal decides that the criteria for detention are not fulfilled, the Tribunal will direct that the person be discharged. A lawyer is also appointed by the Mental Health Commission to represent the detained person, free of charge, at the Mental Health Tribunal hearing. The person may continue to stay in hospital as a voluntary patient, if that is their choice and further treatment is indicated. However, if they do not wish to remain, they must be discharged.

Under Section 28 of the Act, the consultant psychiatrist responsible for the care and treatment of an involuntary person must ensure that they are not inappropriately discharged and that they are detained only for so long as is reasonably necessary for their proper care and treatment.

I should also add that it is important to point out that it is only people who have been diagnosed as having a mental disorder that can be detained under the 2001 Act.

In addition to the present safeguards in the 2001 Act, I am pleased to say that a General Scheme of a Bill to amend the 2001 Act, based on the recommendations of an Expert Group Review of the Act, is currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny in the Oireachtas. The General Scheme was drafted following extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including the Mental Health Commission, the HSE, the College of Psychiatrists, and the Ombudsman for Children, and in light of the findings of a 2021 public consultation which received 100 submissions. The Scheme considers relevant legislation such as the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 and the Mental Health (Amendment) Act 2018, as well as Ireland's commitments under international human rights instruments, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The intention of the changes proposed will be to strengthen the safeguards of persons liable to detention under the Act and ensure that the Act fully respects the autonomy of individuals who have capacity to make their own decisions regarding treatment. These changes and others, when included in revised mental health legislation, will further improve the protections available to mental health service users.

As the specific question the Deputy has raised is a service matter in relation to an individual case, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible on this matter.

### **General Practitioner Services**

**664. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health when free general practitioner care will be extended to six- and seven-year-olds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9052/22]

**726. Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the status of the roll-out of free general practitioner care for six- and seven-year-olds; when he expects the service to be available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9302/22]

**727. Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if has he met with an organisation (details supplied) since budget 2022 to specifically discuss the roll-out of free general

practitioner care for six- and seven-year-olds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9303/22]

790. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health when free general practitioner care for seven- and eight-year-olds will come into effect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9595/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 664, 726, 727 and 790 together.

The Government is committed to increasing access to GP care without charges for children, an important healthcare measure that will remove a potentially prohibitive cost barrier to accessing GP care and will help to improve children's health as they develop. At present all children up to and including the age of 5 are eligible for a GP visit card and therefore GP care without charges. The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020 provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under in three phases: to children aged 6 and 7; to children aged 8 and 9; and to children aged 10, 11 and 12. Budget 2022 provides for the initial stage of this phased expansion, the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged 6 and 7. My officials and the HSE are already engaged in preparatory work, and I expect to be in a position to bring forward proposals to the IMO, representing GPs, later this quarter, after which engagement can commence with the IMO. It is important to ensure that any additional pressures placed on general practice will not limit its capacity to meet the needs of all patients in the community.

### **Primary Care Centres**

665. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the provision of a primary health care centre in Collinstown, Clondalkin, Dublin 22; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9085/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### **Medicinal Products**

666. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health his plans for rolling out antivirals and monoclonal antibody treatments; if any further deliveries have been received since 20 January 2022 when approximately 1,000 treatment courses arrived; the number of the first delivery that has been used to treat patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9087/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A National Therapeutics Advisory Group has been established by the HSE to evaluate, advise, and provide recommendations on all therapeutics with potential for use in the treatment of COVID-19 in Ireland. This encompasses a range of antivirals and monoclonal antibodies currently awaiting, or having recently received, EMA approval.

In parallel, a Therapeutics Operational Group, to be informed by the recommendations of the Therapeutics Advisory Group, has been established to develop the arrangements for provision of these treatments and work is ongoing to establish and develop the most efficient path-

ways to identify those patients who may benefit from their use. It is important to note that these treatments are not for widespread use, and the benefit will be limited to particular cohorts of high-risk vulnerable patients.

### **Medicinal Products**

667. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will meet with a representative group (details supplied) to discuss his plans for antivirals and monoclonal antibody treatments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9088/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A National Therapeutics Advisory Group has been established by the HSE to evaluate, advise, and provide recommendations on all therapeutics with potential for use in the treatment of COVID-19 in Ireland. This encompasses a range of antivirals and monoclonal antibodies currently awaiting, or having recently received, EMA approval.

In parallel, a Therapeutics Operational Group, to be informed by the recommendations of the Therapeutics Advisory Group, has been established to develop the arrangements for provision of these treatments and work is ongoing to establish and develop the most efficient pathways to identify those patients who may benefit from their use. It is important to note that these treatments are not for widespread use, and the benefit will be limited to particular cohorts of high-risk vulnerable patients.

### **Dental Services**

668. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if tooth extraction in the local primary care centre can be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9094/22]

**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.

### **Nursing Homes**

669. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the number of social work investigations, reviews, NIRP reports, independent reviews or other investigative processes that have been completed and or underway and or scheduled within the HSE Older Persons Services Department since 2015 by type of concern and process of review or investigation used; the details relating to HSE funded services in which the processes were initiated following reports and or concerns related to physical, sexual, emotional, financial or institutional abuse or neglect of adult residents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9102/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Nursing Homes**

670. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if any complaints or concerns which were received by line management of the HSE from staff working in the private nursing home sector since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to neglect, institutional, emotional, physical, sexual or financial abuse of residents in those homes, defining abuse as set out in the HSE's 2014 adult safeguarding policy; the number of said concerns that were subsequently referred to HIQA and-or An Garda Síochána by the HSE, broken down according to whom the concerns and complaints were reported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9104/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Services

671. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he is satisfied with the decision making process undertaken in respect of the announcement to locate the central trauma network's major trauma centre at the Mater Hospital, Dublin; if this designation process followed the public consultation document issued prior to the decision being made; if he has considered the concerns raised by neurosurgeons at the National Neurosurgical Centre at Beaumont Hospital regarding this process and the final decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9112/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Trauma Strategy, A Trauma System for Ireland, published in February 2018, recommended the introduction of an inclusive trauma system, that will be delivered by two regional networks, each with a Major Trauma Centre that is linked to a number of Trauma Units. Services will be networked and co-ordinated along standardised pathways to ensure that the right care is delivered in the right place at the right time.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) undertook a clear and objective process to inform the designation of the Mater Hospital as the MTC for the Central Network, including appointing an Independent Assessment Panel, and a public consultation process.

Following an extremely robust process, the Independent Assessment Panel considered that the Mater Hospital had the most potential to become a MTC in terms of current capacity, specialist services already on site, the potential for expansion and its commitment to the implementation of the Trauma Strategy. The Mater Hospital was designated as the MTC for the Central Trauma Network by Government in April 2021.

The National Office for Trauma Services continues to engage stakeholders in the RCSI Hospital Group, Ireland East Hospital Group, National Neurosurgical Centre (NNC) at Beaumont Hospital and the Mater Hospital regarding the provision of neurosurgical services in the MTC at the Mater Hospital.

The National Office for Trauma Services has advised that a meeting was held in December 2021 between senior clinicians from the Mater Hospital and the NNC at Beaumont Hospital, to develop a clinical model of care for neurotrauma in the MTC. A Clinical Advisory Group has been established to progress an integrated model of care for neurotrauma / neurocritical care services for the MTC, involving collaboration between the MTC at the Mater Hospital and the NNC at Beaumont Hospital. The National Office for Trauma Services has advised that this development has been approved by the Trauma System Implementation Programme Steering

Group.

### **Medical Cards**

672. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if he will review an application for a medical card in the case of a person (details supplied); if consideration will be given towards granting a discretionary medical card given the health circumstances of the applicant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9119/22]

**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 Staff**

673. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the urgent need for more acute and community-based podiatrists to help tackle diabetes in communities and to reduce the number of persons having limbs amputated and being hospitalised with foot ulcers as a result of diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9120/22]

**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.

### **Disease Management**

674. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a person with diabetes is 22 times more likely to undergo a non-traumatic lower limb amputation than an individual without diabetes (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9121/22]

**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 Staff**

675. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health his plans to address the podiatry staff shortages in local HSE acute and community services; if he will provide an update on plans for improving podiatry services for patients in County Meath and nationally in line with the HSE Model of Care for the Diabetic Foot. [9123/22]

**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.

### **Ambulance Service**

676. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the number of fully qualified paramedics and other ambulance staff with a degree in paramedic science; the number

recruited with a diploma in emergency medical science from the National Ambulance Service since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9133/22]

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

### **Primary Care Centres**

677. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary healthcare centre in the Lucan and Adamstown areas of Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9135/22]

**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 Supports**

678. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if contracted paramedics from outside the HSE who worked on the hospital wards and were exposed to the same daily risk as hospital staff will be entitled to the €1,000 pandemic payment. [9142/22]

**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.

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.

### **Health Services Staff**

679. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of podiatrists recruited under each HSE acute and community service; the number of podiatrists recruited by county in the past three years in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9148/22]

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

### **Disease Management**

680. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the improvement of podiatrist services for people with diabetes both nationally and within each county, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9149/22]

**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.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

681. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the number of authorised continuous glucose monitors (details supplied) broken down by CHO and LHO for patients aged under 21 and over 21 years of age, respectively, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9168/22]

**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.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

682. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the details of the authorisation of the FreeStyle Libre flash glucose monitor by CHO and LHO to patients aged under 21 and over 21 years of age, respectively, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9169/22]

**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**

683. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9170/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

684. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the status of plans for improving podiatry services for persons with diabetes in CHO6; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9175/22]

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

### Hospital Services

685. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who attended a rapid access lung clinic for a diagnostic test in each month from January 2018 to date; the percentage of these appointments that were seen within the recommended timeframe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9176/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Action Plan on Covid-19 identified the continued provision of cancer care as a priority. Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP).

The performance of each Hospital in meeting target times for rapid access clinic (RAC) appointments is monitored by the NCCP and reviewed at monthly meetings with the Department of Health - with the latest KPI data and RAC attendance figures being available up to December 2021.

The attendances across all Rapid Access Lung Clinics, and the percentage of these appointments seen within the timeframe recommended under the KPI, is as follows for 2018-2021:

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\_pq685-22-02-2022\_en.docx">lungclinic</a>]

Attendances at rapid access lung clinics in 2021 were at 102% of 2019 (pre-covid) levels.

The Government has provided significant extra funding for cancer services in Ireland. Funding of €5m has been provided in 2022 to continue the work of supporting cancer services and increasing capacity in the context of Covid-19. This is in addition to the €12m allocated in 2021. This funding is facilitating additional clinics and the extension of clinic times, as well as allowing for minor infrastructural works to be carried out and for locum and temporary staff to be recruited to support the delivery of services.

### Hospital Services

686. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who received a diagnostic test at a rapid access lung clinic in each of the years 2018 to 2020; and the percentage of these patients who received a diagnosis of cancer in tabular form. [9177/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The number of attendances across all Rapid Access Lung Clinics, and the percentage of these appointments in which a patient received a diagnosis of cancer, is as follows for 2018-2020.

	2018	2019	2020
Attendances	3,592	3,602	3,304

	2018	2019	2020
% resulting in cancer diagnosis	29.0%	36.4%	38.0%

Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). The NCCP is continuing to closely monitor trends in numbers coming forward to diagnostic services, and the level of attendances for appointments for treatment.

### Hospital Services

687. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who attended a rapid access prostate clinic for a diagnostic test in each month from January 2018 to date; the percentage of these appointments that were seen within the recommended timeframe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9178/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Action Plan on Covid-19 identified the continued provision of cancer care as a priority. Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP).

The performance of each Hospital in meeting target times for rapid access clinic (RAC) appointments is monitored by the NCCP and reviewed at monthly meetings with the Department of Health - with the latest KPI data and RAC attendance figures being available up to December 2021.

The attendances across all Rapid Access Prostate Clinics, and the percentage of these appointments seen within the timeframe recommended under the KPI (90% within 20 days of referral), is as follows for 2018-2021.

[[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\\_pq687-22-02-22\\_en.docx](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22_pq687-22-02-22_en.docx)] Attendance at rapid access prostate clinics

Attendances at rapid access prostate clinics in 2021 were at 95% of 2019 (pre-covid) levels.

The Government has provided significant extra funding for cancer services in Ireland. Funding of €5m has been provided in 2022 to continue the work of supporting cancer services and increasing capacity in the context of Covid-19. This is in addition to the €12m allocated in 2021. This funding is facilitating additional clinics and the extension of clinic times, as well as allowing for minor infrastructural works to be carried out and for locum and temporary staff to be recruited to support the delivery of services.

### Hospital Services

688. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who received a diagnostic test at a rapid access prostate clinic in each of the years 2018 to 2020; and the percentage of these patients who received a diagnosis of cancer in tabular form. [9179/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The number of attendances across all Rapid Access Prostate Clinics, and the percentage of these appointments in which a patient received a diagnosis of cancer, is as follows for 2018-2020.

RACs	2018	2019	2020
Attendances	3,356	3,818	3,036
% resulting in cancer diagnosis	34.7%	34.5%	32.6%

Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme is continuing to closely monitor trends in numbers coming forward to diagnostic services, and the level of attendances for appointments for treatment.

### Hospital Services

689. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who attended a symptomatic breast disease clinic for a diagnostic test in each month from January 2018 to date; the percentage of these appointments that were seen within the recommended timeframe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9180/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). The performance of each Hospital in meeting target times for Rapid Access Clinic (RAC) appointments is monitored by the NCCP and reviewed at monthly meetings with the Department of Health - with the latest KPI data and RAC attendance figures being available up to December 2021.

The attendances across urgent Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics, and the percentage of these appointments seen within the timeframe recommended under their respective KPI (95% within 10 days of referral), is as follows for 2018-2021:

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\_pq689-22-02-22\_en.docx">Attended a breast disease clinic</a>]

It is important to note that 2021 attendances at urgent Symptomatic Breast Disease clinics were at 121% of 2019 (pre-Covid) levels.

The Government has provided significant extra funding for cancer services in Ireland. Funding of €5m has been provided in 2022 to continue the work of supporting cancer services and increasing capacity in the context of Covid-19. This is in addition to the €12m allocated in 2021. This funding is facilitating additional clinics and the extension of clinic times, as well as allowing for minor infrastructural works to be carried out and for locum and temporary staff to be recruited to support the delivery of services.

### Hospital Services

690. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who received a diagnostic test at a symptomatic breast disease clinic in each of the years 2018 to 2020; and the percentage of these patients who received a diagnosis of cancer in tabular form. [9181/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The number of attendances whose referrals were triaged as urgent across all Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics, and the percentage of these appointments in which a patient received a diagnosis of cancer, is as follows for 2018-2020.

-	2018	2019	2020
Attendances whose referrals were triaged as urgent	20,005	20,904	20,175
% of urgent attendances resulting in cancer diagnosis	10.20%	9.30%	9.70%

Cancer services continue to operate in line with guidance issued by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). The NCCP is continuing to closely monitor trends in numbers coming forward to diagnostic services, and the level of attendances for appointments for treatment.

### Hospital Facilities

691. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the type and location of beds he plans to open during 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9189/22]

**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

692. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the number of adults with intellectual disabilities in residential care in counties Clare, Limerick and Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9190/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### Health Services

693. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding podiatry services provided by the HSE in County Clare; the status of the service going forward; the number of persons on the waiting list for the service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9191/22]

**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

694. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if clarification will be provided in relation to funding for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9197/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct response.

## Hospital Appointments Status

695. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the case of a person (details supplied); if the appointment will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9198/22]

**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.

## Health Services

696. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a decision will be made on the provision of child speech and language and occupational therapy services for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9217/22]

**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.

## Disability Services

697. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the reason an approved direct payment was revoked for a child disability service in relation to a child (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9218/22]

**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 Staff

698. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on reports in a newspaper (details supplied) regarding the under-recruitment of 10,000 staff budgeted for in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9219/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The article referenced has misconstrued the recruitment targets outlined for 2022 and the achievability of them. Budget 2022 secured funding for up to an additional 10,000 WTE, reflecting the level of ambition and desire to invest in our health services. However, there are a range of targets set out in the draft National Service Plan. The targeted recruitment for this year continues to address any identified staff shortages across grades and service areas.

Discussions between the Department and HSE officials agreed that, due to the current challenging recruitment environment, 5,500 WTE is a more achievable target for 2022. The upper affordable limit of 10,000 WTE is not seen as undeliverable, but rather one that will be ambi-

tious and challenging to achieve, given the risks affecting labour supply. It is worth noting that these recruitment targets are additional WTE and do not include the replacement of existing staff who retire/leave during the year.

The HSE identified the more realistic recruitment target of 5,500 WTE alongside a more challenging ‘stretch’ target of 10,000 WTE set out in the National Service Plan. The Department has been working closely with the HSE to assess potential savings and further decisions on how this funding will be used will be taken. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that the references to ‘fake targets’ and other commentary in the newspaper is more accurately described as stretch or ambitious targets. Actual recruitment will, as always, be monitored by the HSE and the Department throughout the course of the year under the governance and oversight arrangements in place.

### **Health Services Staff**

699. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the HSE services that will be affected by the under-recruitment of 10,000 staff budgeted for in 2022 as reported in a newspaper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9220/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The article referenced has misconstrued the recruitment targets outlined for 2022 and the achievability of them. Budget 2022 secured funding for up to an additional 10,000 WTE, reflecting the level of ambition and desire to invest in our health services. However, there are a range of targets set out in the draft National Service Plan. The targeted recruitment for this year continues to address any identified staff shortages across grades and service areas.

Discussions between the Department and HSE officials agreed that, due to the current challenging recruitment environment, 5,500 WTE is a more achievable target for 2022. The upper affordable limit of 10,000 WTE is not seen as undeliverable, but rather one that will be ambitious and challenging to achieve, given the risks affecting labour supply. It is worth noting that these recruitment targets are additional WTE and do not include the replacement of existing staff who retire/leave during the year.

The HSE identified the more realistic recruitment target of 5,500 WTE alongside a more challenging ‘stretch’ target of 10,000 WTE set out in the National Service Plan. The Department has been working closely with the HSE to assess potential savings and further decisions on how this funding will be used will be taken. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that the references to ‘fake targets’ and other commentary in the newspaper is more accurately described as stretch or ambitious targets. Actual recruitment will, as always, be monitored by the HSE and the Department throughout the course of the year under the governance and oversight arrangements in place.

### **Health Services Staff**

700. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the under-recruitment of 10,000 staff, as reported in a newspaper (details supplied) affects the current plans to address the shortage of child and adolescent mental health service consultants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9221/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon

as possible.

### Health Services Staff

701. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the under-recruitment of 10,000 staff, as reported in a newspaper (details supplied) affects the current plans to address the shortage of consultants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9222/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The article referenced has misconstrued the recruitment targets outlined for 2022 and the achievability of them. Budget 2022 secured funding for up to an additional 10,000 WTE, reflecting the level of ambition and desire to invest in our health services. However, there are a range of targets set out in the draft National Service Plan. The targeted recruitment for this year continues to address any identified staff shortages across grades and service areas.

Discussions between the Department and HSE officials agreed that, due to the current challenging recruitment environment, 5,500 WTE is a more achievable target for 2022. The upper affordable limit of 10,000 WTE is not seen as undeliverable, but rather one that will be ambitious and challenging to achieve, given the risks affecting labour supply. It is worth noting that these recruitment targets are additional WTE and do not include the replacement of existing staff who retire/leave during the year.

The HSE identified the more realistic recruitment target of 5,500 WTE alongside a more challenging ‘stretch’ target of 10,000 WTE set out in the National Service Plan. The Department has been working closely with the HSE to assess potential savings and further decisions on how this funding will be used will be taken. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that the references to ‘fake targets’ and other commentary in the newspaper is more accurately described as stretch or ambitious targets. Actual recruitment will, as always, be monitored by the HSE and the Department throughout the course of the year under the governance and oversight arrangements in place.

### Health Services Staff

702. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the under-recruitment of 10,000 staff, as reported in a newspaper (details supplied) affects the current plans to address the shortage of laboratory scientists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9223/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The article referenced has misconstrued the recruitment targets outlined for 2022 and the achievability of them. Budget 2022 secured funding for up to an additional 10,000 WTE, reflecting the level of ambition and desire to invest in our health services. However, there are a range of targets set out in the draft National Service Plan. The targeted recruitment for this year continues to address any identified staff shortages across grades and service areas.

Discussions between the Department and HSE officials agreed that, due to the current challenging recruitment environment, 5,500 WTE is a more achievable target for 2022. The upper affordable limit of 10,000 WTE is not seen as undeliverable, but rather one that will be ambitious and challenging to achieve, given the risks affecting labour supply. It is worth noting that these recruitment targets are additional WTE and do not include the replacement of existing staff who retire/leave during the year.

The HSE identified the more realistic recruitment target of 5,500 WTE alongside a more challenging ‘stretch’ target of 10,000 WTE set out in the National Service Plan. The Department has been working closely with the HSE to assess potential savings and further decisions on how this funding will be used will be taken. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that the references to ‘fake targets’ and other commentary in the newspaper is more accurately described as stretch or ambitious targets. Actual recruitment will, as always, be monitored by the HSE and the Department throughout the course of the year under the governance and oversight arrangements in place.

### **Health Service Executive**

703. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he has confidence in the HSE to manage the finances received from his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9224/22]

710. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on the financial reporting to his Department by the HSE as per reports in a newspaper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9232/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 703 and 710 together.

The Department of Health and the HSE work closely together to manage the health service and, through Sláintecare, implement the much-needed reform to deliver a better health service for the public. This working relationship, characterised by mutual respect, is professional and constructive. However, it is widely acknowledged that there are many legacy issues across the health service to be addressed. As you may be aware, core elements of the HSE’s financial system at local level are still a reported under the former Health Board system - the HSE, my Department, and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have prioritised the modernisation of the HSE’s financial reporting systems. My officials are supporting the HSE on an overall Finance reform programme to enhance the financial reporting capability of the HSE. The HSE has already undertaken substantial internal work on this issue, and, with the active engagement and support of my Department, the HSE is working to deliver a new modern integrated financial reporting system to address the issues associated with current legacy systems. This project will progressively deliver significant enhancements to financial reporting and streamline procurement processes as it is rolled out across the HSE system and the larger Section 38 and Section 39 health providers. My Department and the HSE are not just focused on longer term projects to deliver new systems. Both agencies are also working together in close cooperation on making interim enhancements to the HSE’s financial reporting capabilities, which in turn enable my Department to provide timely updates to a range of stakeholders including Government, the Health Budget Oversight Group and the Parliamentary Budget Office. In this regard, I would highlight the work undertaken by the HSE Finance Team with support from Department of Health officials over the past two years to make a series of interim financial reporting improvements, within the constraints of current legacy systems focused on a shared understanding and reporting around the HSE’s financial position. For example, new monthly working capital reports and weekly detailed COVID-19 expenditure reporting. These enhancements are welcomed by the Department. However, this is much more to be done in this area and it will be continue to be a key priority for both agencies to work cooperatively to deliver further improvements within the constraints of current systems ahead of the implementation of new systems. It is also important to highlight the role of the Health Budget Oversight Group. This group is a monthly engagement which forms part of the overall financial manage-

ment and governance process between the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I am aware that a Sunday newspaper has published a number of unverified statements on Sunday 13th February and Sunday 20th February. These statements are based on comments alleged to have been made by officials in my Department which the newspaper reports that it has extracted from alleged recordings of private internal discussions within the Department. You will appreciate that my Department has not been afforded access to these alleged recordings which therefore constrains my ability to verify the matters reported or to comment constructively further. However, it is clear that any alleged recordings which may have been obtained are unverified, and were made without the consent or knowledge of the participants in breach apparent breach of privacy rights of the individuals concerned, and as such the reported remarks self-evidently do not represent the formal position of either myself as Minister for Health nor indeed of the Department of Health. I would like to put on record my more general concern - in relation to the appropriateness of the reporting by the Sunday Business Post in printing alleged unverified and casual comments attributed to named officials which were allegedly obtained from recordings of private discussions obtained without the consent or knowledge of the participants concerned. There is an important principle at stake here where we must protect the right of our public servants to engage in private and at times necessarily robust discussions. This is an essential and appropriate part of the deliberative process engaged in by officials and reporting alleged casual comments of individuals in this way will only serve to limit constructive debate and dialogue across the civil service and this is damaging to the public interest. However, it is important to also put on record that the fact that a number of claims have been reported in these two newspaper articles which I referred to above are in fact wholly inaccurate. We have clarified these matters in various other fora and I have taken the opportunity to set out the correct factual position in relation to these matters here also:

- The Sunday Business Post reported on 13th February and 20th February that the HSE sought just €10m in additional funding for mental health last year. That is untrue. The actual figure sought from the HSE was €35m.

- The newspaper speculated that a prior HSE adjustment could run to hundreds of millions. The HSE has noted that is untrue. The HSE have stated that any adjustment will be of a technical nature and be less than €100m. It is as yet unclear whether the HSE will require to make an adjustment in respect to its 2021 financial statements in respect of previous years accounts.

- The report focused on targets for recruitment. Budget 2022 secured funding for up to 10,000 additional staff. We want to hire these and while we should be ambitious, the HSE has said 5,500 is more realistic. However, we will strive to do better and the money is there. The newspaper spoke about so-called fake recruitment targets. This is a complete misrepresentation of the actual position and fails to detail that more than 12,500 healthcare staff have been hired (net) over the past two years.

- On Sunday 20th February, the Sunday Business Post newspaper appears to be suggesting that some €30m given in funding to palliative care providers (hospices) and disability providers is questionable. We fully back the decision to support these organisations.

- There is a claim in the Sunday Business Post on Sunday 20th February that an additional hospital will require more staff. That's self-evident to most people. We absolutely need more hospital beds. We have far fewer beds per 100,000 population than our EU neighbours. Of course public representatives from Limerick and elsewhere will look for additional capacity -the Government has plans to develop additional elective facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway.

I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter and for the opportunity to set out the

actual position on a number of the matters that have been reported.

### **Health Service Executive**

704. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on commencing an investigation into the recruitment practices in the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9226/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** There are no plans to commence an investigation into recruitment practices in the HSE. My Department and I do not have a reason to conduct such an investigation. I am very happy with the successful recruitment that has happened during the large workforce expansion over the past two years. This expansion will continue in 2022.

### **Health Service Executive**

705. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when his attention was drawn to the crisis in recruitment in the HSE regarding the 4,500 shortfalls in new staff as reported in a newspaper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9227/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The article referenced has misconstrued the recruitment targets outlined for 2022 and the achievability of them. Budget 2022 secured funding for up to an additional 10,000 WTE, reflecting the level of ambition and desire to invest in our health services. However, there are a range of targets set out in the draft National Service Plan. The targeted recruitment for this year continues to address any identified staff shortages across grades and service areas.

Discussions between the Department and HSE officials agreed that, due to the current challenging recruitment environment, 5,500 WTE is a more achievable target for 2022. The upper affordable limit of 10,000 WTE is not seen as undeliverable, but rather one that will be ambitious and challenging to achieve, given the risks affecting labour supply. It is worth noting that these recruitment targets are additional WTE and do not include the replacement of existing staff who retire/leave during the year.

The HSE identified the more realistic recruitment target of 5,500 WTE alongside a more challenging 'stretch' target of 10,000 WTE set out in the National Service Plan. The Department has been working closely with the HSE to assess potential savings and further decisions on how this funding will be used will be taken. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that the references to 'fake targets' and other commentary in the newspaper is more accurately described as stretch or ambitious targets. Actual recruitment will, as always, be monitored by the HSE and the Department throughout the course of the year under the governance and oversight arrangements in place.

### **Mental Health Services**

706. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if funding to mental health services will be affected and if staffing targets made by him will be met as per reports in a newspaper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9228/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a ser-

vice matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

707. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on reports in a newspaper (details supplied) that consultants in the HSE are being hired at rates above the starting salary on the pay scale; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9229/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Consultants recruited by the HSE do not have to be appointed to the starting point of the pay scales applicable to the consultant grade. Approved arrangements make provision for the recruitment of a significant proportion of Consultants above the starting point of the pay scale.

An Agreement concluded with the assistance of the Labour Relations Commission (LRC) in January 2015 resulted in a 9 point salary scale for ‘new entrant’ consultants. The Agreement followed engagement between my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the HSE with the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) at the LRC. The Agreement included provisions covering incremental credit that would result in consultants commencing at different points on the scale.

The LRC specifically proposed within the Agreement that incremental credit be available up to the 6th point of the salary scales. It recommended that the parties establish a Committee to develop a framework for the application of incremental credit which would take into account relevant and appropriate service and qualifications. The LRC also proposed the membership of the Committee and recommended, that in addition to the framework, the Committee would set the policy and determine how incremental credit would be recognised in such exceptional cases as arise. In addition, the Agreement provided that Business Cases could be submitted to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in exceptional cases seeking sanction for appointment beyond the 6th point of the scales.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform formally sanctioned the provisions of the Agreement and specifically the Incremental Credit proposals within the Agreement on 29th January 2015. Sanction from the Minister for Health issued to the HSE on 3rd February 2015.

The HSE circulated the finalised Framework, developed and agreed by the Committee within the LRC’s parameters to all relevant personnel, hospitals, CHO’s and agencies on 15 September 2015. This was followed by a FAQ Guidance Note on 28th September 2015.

Taking account of the recognition given to relevant service and additional qualifications within the Incremental Credit Framework it would be expected that many consultants would not commence at the starting point of the salary scale.

### **Health Service Executive**

708. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultants in the HSE who have been hired at rates above the starting salary on the pay scale as per reports in a newspaper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9230/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy concerning the data sought.

It is noted however that Consultants recruited by the HSE do not have to be appointed to the starting point of the pay scales applicable to the consultant grade. Approved arrangements make provision for the recruitment of a significant proportion of Consultants above the starting point of the pay scale.

An Agreement concluded with the assistance of the Labour Relations Commission (LRC) in January 2015 resulted in a 9 point salary scale for 'new entrant' consultants. The Agreement followed engagement between my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the HSE with the Irish Medical Organisation at the LRC. The Agreement includes provisions covering incremental credit that would result in consultants commencing at different points on the scale.

The LRC specifically proposed within the Agreement that incremental credit be available up to the 6th point of the salary scales. It recommended that the parties establish a Committee to develop a framework for the application of incremental credit which would take into account relevant and appropriate service and qualifications. The LRC also proposed the membership of the Committee and recommended, that in addition to the framework, the Committee would set the policy and determine how incremental credit would be recognised in such exceptional cases as arise. In addition, the Agreement provides that Business Cases could be submitted to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in exceptional cases seeking sanction for appointment beyond the 6th point of the scales.

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The HSE circulated the finalised Framework, developed and agreed by the Committee within the LRC's parameters, to all relevant personnel, hospitals, CHO's and agencies on 15 September 2015. This was followed by a FAQ Guidance Note on 28th September 2015.

Taking account of the recognition given to relevant service and additional qualifications within the Incremental Credit Framework it would be expected that many consultants would not commence at the starting point of the salary scale.

### **Health Service Executive**

**709. Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on the recruitment practices of the HSE with regard to the hiring of consultants as per reports in a newspaper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9231/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Consultants recruited by the HSE do not have to be appointed to the starting point of the pay scales applicable to the consultant grade. Approved arrangements make provision for the recruitment of a significant proportion of Consultants above the starting point of the pay scale.

An Agreement concluded with the assistance of the Labour Relations Commission (LRC) in January 2015 resulted in a 9 point salary scale for 'new entrant' consultants. The Agreement followed engagement between my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the HSE with the Irish Medical Organisation at the LRC. The Agreement included provisions covering incremental credit that would result in consultants commencing at different points on the scale.

The LRC specifically proposed within the Agreement that incremental credit be available

up to the 6th point of the salary scales. It recommended that the parties establish a Committee to develop a framework for the application of incremental credit which would take into account relevant and appropriate service and qualifications. The LRC also proposed the membership of the Committee and recommended, that in addition to the framework, the Committee would set the policy and determine how incremental credit would be recognised in such exceptional cases as arise. In addition, the Agreement also provided that Business Cases could be submitted to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in exceptional cases seeking sanction for appointment beyond the 6th point of the scales.

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The HSE circulated the finalised Framework, developed and agreed by the Committee within the LRC's parameters, to all relevant personnel, hospitals, CHO's and agencies on 15 September 2015. This was followed by a FAQ Guidance Note on 28th September 2015.

Taking account of the recognition given to relevant service and additional qualifications within the Incremental Credit Framework it would be expected that many consultants would not commence at the starting point of the salary scale.

*Question No. 710 answered with Question No. 703.*

### **Health Service Executive**

711. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has knowingly set staffing targets and funding for the HSE that are undeliverable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9233/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Budget 2022 secured funding for up to an additional 10,000 WTE, reflecting the level of ambition and desire to invest in our health services. However, there are a range of targets set out in the draft National Service Plan. The targeted recruitment for this year continues to address any identified staff shortages across grades and service areas.

Discussions between the Department and HSE officials agreed that, due to the current challenging recruitment environment, 5,500 WTE is a more achievable target for 2022. The upper affordable limit of 10,000 WTE is not seen as undeliverable, but rather one that will be ambitious and challenging to achieve, given the risks affecting labour supply. It is worth noting that these recruitment targets are additional WTE and do not include the replacement of existing staff who retire/leave during the year.

The HSE identified the more realistic recruitment target of 5,500 WTE alongside a more challenging 'stretch' target of 10,000 WTE set out in the National Service Plan. The Department has been working closely with the HSE to assess potential savings and further decisions on how this funding will be used will be taken. Actual recruitment will, as always, be monitored by the HSE and the Department throughout the course of the year under the governance and oversight arrangements in place.

### **Dental Services**

712. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Ques-

tion No. 1399 of 24 March 2021, the progress made in reviewing the dental treatment services scheme; the result of engagements he has had with the dental community in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9241/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have given a commitment to a substantive review of the Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTTS), which will include fees paid to dentists. I have also acknowledged the immediate issues of concern with current arrangements under the Scheme.

Officials from my Department and from the HSE have held two rounds of discussions with the Irish Dental Association, the most recent on 17 December last when my Department and the HSE presented proposals to invest additional resources in the DTTS including €10m provided in the Budget, on top of the 2022 Estimate allocation of €56 million.

The Department/HSE has offered increased fees across a number of items and proposed the reintroduction of the Scale and Polish item.

These proposals were expedited to address not only the problem of access for patients, but also concerns expressed by dentists about the viability of the DTSS, and to some extent, to bring about alignment with the Dental Treatment Benefits Scheme, which is widely operated by dentists for PRSI patients.

The Department wishes to move the process on, in the interests of patients, and is hoping to meet the Irish Dental Association again in the next couple of weeks to progress matters.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

713. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Meath will receive an appointment at the National Rehabilitation Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9242/22]

**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.

### **Legislative Measures**

714. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the legal advice he has received in regard to the drafting of legislation for safe access zones; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9250/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, legal advice is confidential and privileged. My responses to the Deputies during Committee Stage of the Safe Access to Termination of Pregnancy Services Bill 2021 gave an overview of the legal advice provided to me and are a matter of Seanad record.

### **Disability Services**

715. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health the number of psychiatric services for adults with ASD in the HSE, broken down by region; and his plans to expand these

services. [9252/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### Departmental Inquiries

716. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the recent revelation in the media (details supplied) that a critical peer review by a person of a key section of the Askeaton Inquiry Report was not published at the time of the report in 2001; if an inquiry will be conducted into the reason this happened; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9258/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am satisfied with the findings of the Askeaton Inquiry Report and therefore do not propose to have any further inquiries conducted into the matter.

### Dental Services

717. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of primary school dental services in areas of mid-west Dublin; the waiting times and availability of dentists visiting primary schools in the area in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9259/22]

**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.

### Dental Services

718. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health the waiting lists for dental checks for children at six, nine and 12 years of age in the mid-west areas of Dublin in tabular form; if there are delays in children receiving these checks; the steps he is taking to ensure that these children receive checks in a timely manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9260/22]

**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.

### Home Care Packages

719. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to standardise home care rates of pay and benefits across Ireland (details supplied). [9261/22]

720. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the steps that are being taken to ensure better terms and conditions will be provided to enable Alzheimer's organisations (details supplied) to retain home care staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9262/22]

721. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health if he is considering increasing the

funding for organisations (details supplied) to operate a buddy system or to allow new starters to work alongside more experienced staff for a meaningful period of time. [9263/22]

722. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health his views on the need for a review to provide a balance between State providers of home care services and their NGO and private sector counterparts (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9265/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 719 to 722, inclusive, together.

The Government is committed to improving community-based services, shifting care to the home, and offering greater choice for older people.

During the lifetime of this Government, I have secured additional funding of €150 million for home support, to progress the development of a reformed model of service delivery to underpin the statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home support services, and to provide for up to 5 million additional hours of home support last year. Funding for these additional hours has been maintained into 2022.

Preliminary data shows that about 2.9 million more home support hours were delivered by the end of December 2021, compared to the same period in 2020.

I am aware that delays can arise between funding approval and the delivery of home support hours. Certain regions are experiencing increased pressures due to staff availability.

I am committed to establishing a cross-Departmental Strategic Workforce Advisory Group to examine strategic workforce challenges, including recruitment and retention of workers, in front-line carer roles in home support and nursing homes. This will include those home support workers providing support to those with Alzheimer's.

The work of this Group will centre on engagement with the relevant stakeholders in the sector. To this end, a 'Call for Submissions' was issued by my Department to relevant stakeholders in December 2021. Following receipt of these completed submissions in January, my Department undertook a short-life scoping exercise to gather initial data and evidence on the nature and extent of the challenges in the sector to inform the structure and membership of this cross-departmental Group.

This scoping exercise is now complete and invitations to join the Group, along with its draft Terms of Reference, have been issued to all relevant Government Departments and agencies. The inaugural meeting of the Group will be held in the week beginning 28th February 2022.

At this meeting, the Terms of Reference for the Group and action timelines will be agreed. These Terms of Reference will be published once finalised by the Group.

This Group will then progress a structured programme of ongoing consultative engagements with key sectoral stakeholders to further explore and define the issues, listen to stakeholder views, and identify approaches to respond to the strategic workforce challenges.

The Group will provide a forum for agreement on strategic approaches to address the workforce challenges in the sector and develop a report for my consideration outlining the Group's key findings, recommendations, and a proposed action plan to support implementation of these recommendations to include periodic monitoring of progress.

Potential areas to be considered by the Group include recruitment, retention, training, and the career development of front-line carers in home support and nursing homes into the future.

It is also expected that pay and conditions for these workers will be examined. Without pre-empting the outcomes of the work of the Group, the buddy system mentioned by the Deputy may emerge as a solution to address the challenges in the sector, however it is too soon to say at this time.

*Question No. 720 answered with Question No. 719.*

*Question No. 721 answered with Question No. 719.*

*Question No. 722 answered with Question No. 719.*

### **Health Services Staff**

723. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultant applications advisory committee approved consultant posts on 1 January in each of the years 2016 to 2022. [9286/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given its statutory functions in relation to approval of consultant posts I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy concerning the data sought.

### **Disease Management**

724. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the status of plans for improving podiatry services for persons in south-west Dublin and nationally in relation to the HSE model of care for the diabetic foot (details supplied). [9293/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

725. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the action he will take to ensure that medical card holders in County Kerry are able to access dental care given that the HSE has stated there are no dentists taking on new medical card patients in the county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9298/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS), which dates from the 1990s is available to medical card holders aged 16 and over. The dental care is provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE. Patients may choose to have their treatment undertaken by any dentist who participates in the scheme. The Scheme covers a dental examination, two fillings in each calendar year, prescriptions, denture repairs and extractions as necessary. Other more complex treatments such as the provision of dentures require the approval of the HSE before the dentist can proceed and in this case the dentist applies directly to the HSE.

There is a need to align the DTSS with best international evidence and practice, and legislation, as outlined in Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy. Regrettably, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the roll-out of the Policy to be delayed and the proposed review of the DTSS contract to be deferred.

It is regrettable that a significant number of dentists chose to leave the DTSS that provides care for medical card patients during the pandemic, which has led to difficulties for medical card patients in accessing dental care in some parts of the country. In such circumstances, I have been assured that the HSE Public Dental Service is seeking to provide emergency cover for any medical card patients who are experiencing such problems.

I have given a commitment to a substantive review of the DTSS, which will include fees paid to dentists. I have also acknowledged the immediate issues of concern with current arrangements under the Scheme.

My officials met with the Irish Dental Association in December to address both of these issues. It is the intention of my officials to hold further talks in Q1 of this year.

I would also wish to point out that I secured additional funding of €10 million in Budget 2022 to address immediate issues with the DTSS, which is on top of the annual allocation of €56 million for 2022.

*Question No. 726 answered with Question No. 664.*

*Question No. 727 answered with Question No. 664.*

### **Healthcare Policy**

728. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the status of the roll-out of free contraception for 17- to 25-year-olds; when he expects free contraception to be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9304/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Report of the Working Group on Access to Contraception, published in October 2019, identified the barriers that exist to accessing contraception, which include accessibility, information, work-force capacity and, for a significant number of women who may be just above the eligibility threshold for a full GMS (medical) card, cost.

In consideration of the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the 8th Amendment to the Constitution (JOC8) and the findings of the Working Group on Contraception, the *Programme for Government, 2020* commits to providing free contraception for women, starting with the 17-25 age cohort.

Work on this was temporarily delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, but the cross-disciplinary Contraception Implementation Group was set up in July 2021 to progress the introduction of this scheme.

The Contraception Implementation Group meets on a monthly basis, with small sub-groups also meeting with counterparts in the HSE to ensure that steady progress is being made on implementation. Funding of approximately €9m has been allocated in Budget 2022 to enable commencement of the scheme, which is scheduled for August 2022.

The scheme will provide for:

1. The cost of prescription contraception;
2. The cost of two consultations per annum with GPs and other doctors to discuss suitable contraception for individual patients and to enable prescription of same;

3. The cost of fitting and/or removal of various types of long-acting reversible contraception (LARCs) plus any necessary checks, by medical professionals certified to fit/remove same;

4. The cost of training and certifying additional medical professionals to fit and remove LARCs;

5. Provision of contraceptive options currently available to GMS (medical) card holders through this scheme, to include contraceptive injections, implants, IUS and IUDs (coils), the contraceptive patch and ring, and various forms of oral contraceptive pill, including emergency contraception.

For items such as the contraceptive pill, these are typically prescribed at 6 month intervals, so two consultations allows for full provision. For LARCs, (e.g. IUS, IUD, implants, injections, patches and rings), where the fittings/injections are carried out by healthcare professionals, fitting and removal appointments are also provided for separately, in addition to the two consultations.

Work on the legislative framework for the scheme is ongoing. Formal negotiations with medical and other relevant representative bodies with regard to service provision are due to commence in March 2022.

As part of the allocation of funding for the scheme that was provided for in Budget 2022, funds are being made available for additional training capacity with respect to certification of medical professionals to fit and remove LARCs. Engagement with the HSE in relation to this is ongoing.

## Medicinal Products

729. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the shortage of hormone replacement therapy in the Republic of Ireland; the steps he has taken to address the shortages; if he has engaged with his counterpart in Northern Ireland in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9305/22]

793. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the reason for shortages in HRT medicines given that The Health Products Regulatory Authority has listed these as medicines shortages; the measures that are in place to minimise impact or disruption to patient care and the impact on healthcare professionals caused by these shortages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9602/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 729 and 793 together.

Medicine shortages have become increasingly prevalent worldwide over the past decade and are a feature of modern health systems around the world. There are many reasons for such shortages including shortages of raw materials, manufacturing difficulties, logistical/transport issues or product recalls due to potential quality defects. Medicines shortages can therefore originate at any point in the supply chain and can involve and impact on many different stakeholders. Accordingly, medicines shortages require a multi-faceted, multi-stakeholder response to ensure patient safety, continuity of care and protection of public health.

As a result of the increasing prevalence of medicines shortages globally, there has been significant interest at European level in this area, including a task force on medicines availability to identify and address issues linked to the disruption of supplies of medicines. Ireland, through

my Department and the Health Products Regulatory Authority, continues to contribute to these efforts at a European level to consider initiatives to minimise the risk and disruption to patient safety and care, and the impact on healthcare professionals, caused by medicine shortages. As well, colleagues within the Department continue to engage with their counterparts in Northern Ireland in order to better address health concerns across the island.

At a national level, Ireland has a multi-stakeholder medicines shortages framework in place, coordinated by the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), to prevent, wherever possible, and manage medicine shortages when they occur. The HPRA have been notified of intermittent supply challenges involving HRT medicines that have been ongoing for some months. These supply difficulties are due to a significantly increased demand for these products in Ireland in recent years. The HPRA continues to engage with the companies involved to mitigate the impact of the shortages.

In the case of medicines used most often in Ireland, there are typically multiple brands and/or generic medicines available from a range of sources. In the event that supply issues arise for individual medicines, different options, including alternative brands or generic medicines, should be made available to ensure continuity of treatment. If the patient has concerns, they should discuss their treatment and alternative options with their doctor, pharmacist or other healthcare professional.

### **Primary Care Services**

730. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the number of days per week the new lymphoedema specialist clinic in Ennis, County Clare was in operation in 2021; the number of patients currently awaiting appointments at the lymphoedema clinic; the length of the waiting times for patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9313/22]

**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**

731. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of national independent review panel reports under way currently, by CHO area and by the type of service under review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9327/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy's question relates to an operational matter, I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

732. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of national independent review panels launched in each of the past ten years by CHO area and by the type of service reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9328/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy's question relates to a HSE operational matter, I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

## Departmental Funding

733. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the funding that was provided to a group (details supplied) in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9331/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

## Hospital Waiting Lists

734. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health if additional resources are being allocated to hospitals in order to address the backlog of children awaiting their 9 to 11 month developmental check given that many children are not receiving an appointment for this timeframe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9332/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Child development checks are provided by Public Health Nurses alongside a range of other community healthcare services.

In relation to service capacity, since March 2020, many Public Health Nursing staff have been redeployed to support COVID-19 related clinical activities including providing clinical leadership and direct support in the establishment of COVID-19 vaccination clinics. This redeployment of staff has had a significant impact on the capacity of the Public Health Nursing service to deliver the core child health screening and surveillance programme. However, as public health nursing staff returned to their core duties the child development check services were prioritised. Any parents with a concern should contact their GP or local HSE Public Health Nursing service.

In respect of additional resources, the Government is investing €195m in 2022 under the Enhanced Community Care programme which will support recruitment of around 3,500 primary and community staff, including more nursing staff.

## Health Services Staff

735. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the number of adult psychiatrists employed by the HSE who treat people with ADHD in CHO9; the practices in which they are located; if there are plans to increase resources in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9334/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

## Healthcare Policy

736. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the status of the community healthcare networks supporting the expansion of services based on the need and size of local populations as outlined in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9341/22]

**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 Staff**

737. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding payments to healthcare assistants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9342/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

738. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the way he plans to deal with the severe lack of podiatrists available to care for persons with diabetes (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9345/22]

**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.

### **Disability Services**

739. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on an independent review into the CHO1 in the north west and its ability to manage and operate disability services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9347/22]

740. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO2; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9348/22]

741. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO3; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9349/22]

742. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO4; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9350/22]

743. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO5; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9351/22]

744. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO6; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9352/22]

745. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO7; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9353/22]

746. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO8; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9354/22]

747. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will commence an independent review into the quality and management of disability services in CHO9; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9355/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 739 to 747, inclusive, together.

In December 2021, the CEO of HIQA advised the Minister of Health and the Minister of State with responsibility for Disabilities of concerns in relation to the HSE's governance, management, and oversight of social care in CHO1. The Chief Inspector of Social Services, in the context of HIQA functions under the Health Act 2007 as amended, had brought concerns to the CEO's attention. The Chief Inspector is an independent statutory function responsible for the registration and inspection of designated centres, including those for people with disabilities.

The Chief Inspector has instigated a regulatory programme requiring the HSE to take action to improve the quality of life for residents of designated disability centres and regulatory compliance. HIQA is monitoring the progress of the HSE.

The progress on the steps being taken by HIQA the regulator, and the response by the HSE to address the safeguarding and governance concerns in adult disability services in CHO1, is being monitored by the Department of Health and the Minister of State with responsibility for Disabilities, Minister Rabbitte.

Minister Rabbitte, with the Department of Health and HSE, is actively considering and scoping what might be done to further enhance safeguarding in residential care in the area.

The findings of HIQA's regulatory programme, and the work of the HSE in this regard in CHO1, will be considered and learnings may inform safeguarding policy more generally as appropriate. It is important, however, to allow the work underway to progress. The ultimate aim is to ensure that services are safe for clients and that those working in the services are appropriately supported.

Work is currently underway by the Department of Health in developing a national policy on adult safeguarding in the health and social care sector, which includes disability services. The intention of this Policy development is to enhance / strengthen the health and social care sector's wider adult safeguarding framework.

The delivery of high-quality safe services for adults with a disability in CHO1 is of the highest priority. All steps being taken to provide assurance of this is to be welcomed.

*Question No. 740 answered with Question No. 739.*

*Question No. 741 answered with Question No. 739.*

*Question No. 742 answered with Question No. 739.*

*Question No. 743 answered with Question No. 739.*

*Question No. 744 answered with Question No. 739.*

*Question No. 745 answered with Question No. 739.*

Question No. 746 answered with Question No. 739.

Question No. 747 answered with Question No. 739.

### Disability Services

748. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he is confident that HIQA as a regulator is receiving adequate and timely notifications from disability health service providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9356/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulations set out specific incidents that providers are legally required to notify to the Chief Inspector of Social Services, and the timeline for submitting same. According to HIQA, the majority of providers make notifications to the Chief Inspector within the required timeframe. In cases where notifications are not made on time, this is identified as a regulatory non-compliance and the provider is required to take action to ensure they meet the requirements of the regulations.

A report on each HIQA inspection, which includes information on compliance with regulations, is published by the Authority on its website – [www.hiqa.ie](http://www.hiqa.ie). Information on notifications is also included in the Authority’s Annual Report.

### Obesity Levels

749. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the progress that has been made on the action in the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025 to progress implementation of the commitment to use planning to address the obesogenic environment; the plans that are in place for 2022 for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9357/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025 was published in May 2021 by Minister Stephen Donnelly and myself, following an extensive stakeholder consultation process. The Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan builds on the success of the Healthy Ireland Framework, which was published in 2013. The Action Plan contains 56 strategic actions across six themes which will be implemented over the lifetime of the plan. It takes a “whole of government” and “whole of society” approach, and each action has a lead government department from across fourteen separate government departments.

One of the strategic actions under Theme 2, “Partnerships and Cross-Sectoral Work”, is to “*Engage and collaborate with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to align policy and initiatives with Healthy Ireland policy* “. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) is represented on both the Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group and the National Physical Activity Plan Implementation Group (NPAP IG). The Department of Health also collaborates with DHLGH in other fora, such as the Town Centre First interdepartmental advisory group.

An Implementation Action under the strategic action referred to above is “*Implementation of the commitment to use planning to address the obesogenic environment* “. Due to other priorities, progress has not been made in this area since the publication of the Strategic Action Plan. In 2022, the Department will work with the lead Department, DHLGH, and other stakeholders to progress work in this complex area.

## Obesity Levels

750. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the current members of the Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group; the person that currently chairs the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9358/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group (OPIOG) was set up under the Obesity Policy and Action Plan, published in 2016. The OPIOG is currently chaired by the Principal Officer of the Health and Wellbeing Programme in the Department of Health and also includes representatives from the following organisations:

- Department of Health
- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- Department of Social Protection
- Department of Education
- Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
- Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
- Health Service Executive
  - *safe* food
- Food Safety Authority of Ireland
- University College Cork

### Health Services Staff

751. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff members that are currently employed and working on children's disability network teams in County Cork by role and by team in tabular form; and the number of unfilled posts. [9373/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services Staff

752. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time diabetes podiatrists by county and hospital in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9386/22]

**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 Staff**

753. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost of recruiting four additional full-time diabetes podiatrists for each CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9387/22]

**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 Staff**

754. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the actions he will take to address the shortage of diabetes podiatrists; the status of the recruitment of additional diabetes podiatrists as has been recommended by the HSE Model of Care for the Diabetic Foot through the HSE chronic disease management community hubs; if he will provide an update on his plans for improving podiatry services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9388/22]

**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**

755. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to matters raised in correspondence from an association (details supplied); and if he will establish a taskforce with consultation from named bodies in order to scope the level of service requirements to address the issues and the gaps in allocated resources associated to Huntington's disease. [9389/22]

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

### **Health Services**

756. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will expedite the establishment of a working group under the joint auspices of the national dementia office and the Integrated Care Programme to determine the needs and solutions to provide persons with Huntington's disease and their families with a good standard of care in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9390/22]

770. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health if he will establish a working group under the joint auspices of the national dementia office and the integrated care programme to determine the needs and outline solutions for people with Huntington's disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9436/22]

772. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to establish a working group under the joint auspices of the national dementia office and the integrated care programme to determine the needs and solutions to provide persons with Huntington's disease and their families a good standard of care in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[9497/22]

858. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to establishing a working group under the joint auspices of the National Dementia Office and the integrated care programme to determine the needs and solutions to provide persons with Huntington's disease and their families a good standard of care; the engagements that have taken place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9950/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 756, 770, 772 and 858 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

757. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacancies in podiatry services in local HSE acute and community services in CHO1; when these vacancies will be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9395/22]

**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**

758. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the status of the plans to improve podiatry services for persons with diabetes in the CHO1 area and throughout the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9396/22]

**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.

### **State Bodies**

759. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider establishing a notification system of deaths to State agencies given the upset receipt of correspondence for a deceased relatives causes for families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9405/22]

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

*Question No. 760 answered with Question No. 661.*

### **Healthcare Policy**

761. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if direction will be given to maternity hospitals in relation to access to maternity wards for expectant fathers in the lead up to a birth given that Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted. [9410/22]

**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**

762. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the status of the health technology assessment on a school-based HPV mop-up vaccination programme; his views on the provision of the HPV vaccine to those who missed or turned down a vaccine in the first year of school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9412/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department. The NIAC continues to revise recommendations to allow for the introduction of new vaccines in Ireland and to keep abreast of changes in the patterns of disease. Therefore, the immunisation schedule will continue to be amended over time. In 2009, the NIAC recommended HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccination for all 12 to 13 year old girls to reduce their risk of developing cervical cancer when they are adults. In September 2010, the HPV vaccination programme was introduced for all girls in first year of secondary school. In June 2017, on foot of the NIAC's recommendation that the HPV vaccine should also be given to boys, my Department asked the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) to undertake a health technology assessment (HTA) to establish the clinical and cost-effectiveness of extending the immunisation programme to include boys in the first year of secondary school. The HIQA completed the HTA in December 2018, recommending that the HPV immunisation programme be extended to include boys. A policy decision was made to extend the HPV immunisation programme to include boys, starting in September 2019, with the introduction of a 9-valent HPV vaccine. The ages at which vaccines are recommended in the immunisation schedule are chosen by the NIAC in order to give each child the best possible protection against vaccine preventable diseases. As the HPV vaccine is preventative it is intended to be administered, if possible, before a person becomes sexually active, that is, before a person is first exposed to HPV infection. Therefore, the gender-neutral HPV vaccination programme targets all girls and boys in first year of secondary school to provide maximum coverage. All vaccines administered through the School Immunisation Programme are provided free of charge. My Department will continue to be guided by NIAC's recommendations on any emerging evidence on this issue in the future. Anyone not in 1st year of secondary school or age equivalent in special schools or home schooled during the 2020/2021 school year who wishes to get the HPV vaccine, must go to their GP or sexual health clinic and pay privately for the vaccine and its administration. This applies to everyone whether or not they have a medical card/GP visit card, as it is outside of the HPV immunisation programme.

My Department has asked the National Immunisation Advisory Committee to consider the clinical effectiveness of providing the HPV vaccine to:

- girls and boys in secondary school who were eligible to receive HPV vaccine in 1st year but who did not receive it; and
- women up to the age of 25 years who have left secondary school and who did not receive the vaccine when eligible.

If NIAC conclude that there is sufficient evidence to support providing the HPV vaccine to one or both groups, HIQA will undertake a cost-effectiveness assessment on that basis.

## Health Service Executive

763. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if his Department was alerted to correspondence between the CEO of HIQA and the CEO of the HSE relating to a matter (details supplied); if so, the date the attention of his Department was drawn to the correspondence; when his attention was drawn to the matter; and when the attention of the Ministers for State at his Department was drawn to the matter discussed in the correspondence. [9420/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** On 10 December 2021, the CEO of HIQA wrote to the Minister of Health copying the Minister of State with responsibility for Disabilities and Department officials. He wrote of concerns in relation to the HSE's governance, management, and oversight of social care in CHO1. The Chief Inspector of Social Services, in the context of HIQA functions under the Health Act 2007 as amended, had brought concerns to the attention of HIQA's CEO.

The CEO advised that he had written to the HSE's CEO on the matter and that the Chief Inspector had informed the HSE of her concerns.

The progress on the steps being taken by HIQA as regulator, and the response by the HSE to address the safeguarding and governance concerns in adult disability services in CHO1, is being monitored by the Department of Health and the Minister of State with responsibility for Disabilities, Minister Rabbitte.

### Departmental Correspondence

764. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of times he has received correspondence from the CEO of HIQA since he took office; and the dates on which he received the correspondence. [9421/22]

765. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of times he has met with the CEO of HIQA since he took office; and the dates on which such meetings took place. [9422/22]

766. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of times the CEO of HIQA has requested to meet with him since he took office. [9423/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 764, 765 and 766 together.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) was established in 2007 as an independent authority to drive high-quality and safe care for health and social care services in Ireland.

HIQA's mandate extends across a range of public, private and voluntary sector services. Reporting to the Minister for Health and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, HIQA's role is to develop standards, inspect and review health and social care services and support informed decisions on how services are delivered.

The CEO of HIQA has made no requests to meet with me since I took office. My department and I engage with HIQA on an ongoing basis and I have met with the CEO of HIQA on five occasions since I took office. The dates of these meetings were as follows: 7th September 2020, 15th October 2020, 21st December 2020, 8th January 2021, and 9th July 2021.

*Questions - Written Answers*

As part of the ongoing engagement I have received 20 items of correspondence from the CEO of HIQA since I took office. These items were received on the following dates:

-	Date Received
1	27/08/2020
2	17/09/2020
3	24/09/2020
4	30/09/2020
5	26/11/2020
6	22/01/2021
7	22/01/2021
8	10/02/2021
9	23/07/2021
10	23/07/2021
11	23/07/2021
12	14/09/2021
13	14/09/2021
14	19/10/2021
15	18/11/2021
16	10/12/2021
17	11/01/2022
18	11/01/2022
19	01/02/2022
20	17/02/2022

*Question No. 765 answered with Question No. 764.*

*Question No. 766 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Health Services**

767. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps that he has taken to develop care pathway for those with Huntington's disease; if he has engaged with a group (details supplied) in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9427/22]

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

### **Emergency Services**

768. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the provision of a new fit for purpose ambulance station in Drogheda, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9428/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to

respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

769. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment at Galway University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9431/22]

**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.

*Question No. 770 answered with Question No. 756.*

### **Residential Institutions**

771. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding regulation for certain communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9438/22]

801. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if care homes (details supplied) will be regulated by HIQA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9644/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 771 and 801 together.

The Health Act 2007 established the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) and the Office of the Chief Inspector of Social Services. In doing so, it also provides for a scheme of registration and inspection of residential services for older persons (nursing homes), persons with disabilities and children in need of care and protection. HIQA's functions include the setting of standards on safety and quality in respect of these residential services and the Chief Inspector of Social Services monitors compliance with standards and regulations. In accordance with Section 2 of the Health Act 2007 and Section 2 of the Health (Nursing Homes) Act 1990, premises in which a majority of the residents are members of a religious order or are priests of any religion (religious institutions), are exempted from the provisions of the 2007 Act as they are not 'designated centres' as defined in the Act. In the context of the 1990 Act at the time of its passing in the Oireachtas, careful consideration was given to striking a balance between facilitating those religious communities that specialise in providing nursing home care to priests or members of religious orders and excluding those communities that care for their older members within the rules of their religious founders. As such, only a nursing home run by a religious community caring for dependent persons who are in receipt of a subvention from a health board, as it was at that time, was included in the regulatory framework. The Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009 also only recognises registered nursing homes in the context of State support under that Act. The COVID-19 pandemic has identified substantial learning in the context of nursing home services, including the supporting regulatory framework, which requires review. Minister Donnelly and I have determined a phased approach to examining the

legislation with a view to enhancing the nursing home regulatory model. Phase 1 is bringing forward interim legislative enhancements aimed at making initial improvements to the regulatory framework. This work is ongoing in my Department and is the priority focus in terms of regulatory reform. The Government included a Health (Amendment) Bill on its legislative agenda, aimed at legislative amendments to enhance the oversight and regulation of nursing homes. Phase 2 will be a wider, root-and-branch review of the nursing home regulatory model, incorporating best practices and guidance established through both a national and international evidence review of nursing home regulatory models. On completion of phase 1, my Department will establish a process for the phase 2 wider review of the regulatory model underpinning nursing homes. To facilitate planning for this, my Department will undertake a scoping exercise in the second half of 2022 to determine the scope of phase 2 of the review. I will ask my officials to consider the issue of religious orders in the context of this scoping work to determine if the issue can be examined in the wider review.

*Question No. 772 answered with Question No. 756.*

### **Departmental Data**

773. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the detail of the incidence of presentations at hospitals in the State with myocarditis, aneurysms and clotting disorders by month in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9532/22]

**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**

774. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health his plans following the recently launched HSE model of care for the diabetic foot to address the shortage of podiatry specialists in CHO1 acute and community services; the status of plans for improving podiatry services for persons with diabetes in counties Sligo and Leitrim and nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9535/22]

**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 Service Executive**

775. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter in relation to respite services in County Kerry (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9539/22]

**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.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

776. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of children currently awaiting occupational therapy appointments in south west County; the average waiting time for an appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9541/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

777. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if there are vacant positions for speech and language therapists in CHO4; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9542/22]

781. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff members by role currently employed and working on children's disability network teams in each area of CHO4 by team in tabular form. [9546/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 777 and 781 together.

As the Deputy's questions relate to service issues, they have been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

778. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if there are vacant positions for occupational therapists in CHO4; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9543/22]

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

### **Home Care Packages**

779. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons availing of homecare hours; and the number of hours assigned in CHO4 by LHO in 2021. [9544/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Home Care Packages**

780. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting homecare hours; and the number of hours they are waiting for in CHO4 by LHO in 2021. [9545/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon

as possible.

*Question No. 781 answered with Question No. 777.*

### **Mental Health Services**

782. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the current waiting list for CAMHS services in each area of CHO4; the average waiting time in tabular form; and his plans to address this. [9547/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Disability Services**

783. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on waiting lists for assessments for each children's disability network team in each CHO as of 14 February 2022. [9548/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

784. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health his plans for dedicated Huntington's disease clinics, staffing and funding; if he will establish a working group under the joint auspices of the National Dementia Office and the integrated care programme ensuring that the work is completed within the next six months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9551/22]

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

### **Disability Services**

785. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff members by role currently employed and working on children's disability network teams in each county by team in tabular form; and the number of unfilled posts. [9554/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

786. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the additional support and resources that are to be provided to the north Dublin city and county orthodontic unit in 2022 and 2023 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9560/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Dental care for children under 16 is provided by the Public Dental Service of the HSE. Emergency care is provided for all children under 16. In addition, targeted screening and prevention is provided for school children at certain dental developmental milestones and for special needs groups.

In 2015 the Department of Health approved a Treatment Waiting List Initiative, with an allocation of €1million per annum, to target patients who were waiting over 4 years for treatment. A procurement commenced in 2016 and ended in 2020. It resulted in 1,996 patients having treatment with private Specialist Orthodontists at a total cost of €5.65m.

In 2021, the HSE commenced a new procurement that allows patients to have treatment with private Specialist Orthodontists. It replaces the previous procurement that ended in 2020. Under the new procurement the first patients were allocated to private Specialist Orthodontists in Q3 of 2021. By the end of 2021, 870 patients had commenced treatment under these arrangements. The allocation of patients to private Specialist Orthodontists is continuing in 2022.

The HSE advise that children who are 16 or under have access to treatment through the HSE for emergency treatment.

### **Departmental Advertising**

787. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the amount that his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9577/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My Department has not paid for advertising or features in this publication.

### **Health Services Staff**

788. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the reason the HSE is not allowing ward clerks on to wards at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Navan, County Meath to assist families who are unable to visit sick and elderly persons to answer their phone or set up a facetime call (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9592/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

789. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the status of a dental waiting list position of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9593/22]

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

*Question No. 790 answered with Question No. 664.*

### **Health Services**

791. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the longest time that a child who is classified as semi-urgent, urgent and immediate has been waiting for an MRI scan at University Hospital Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9596/22]

**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.

### **Disabilities Assessments**

792. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the process to get tested for a young adult who believes they are on the autism spectrum. [9601/22]

**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.

*Question No. 793 answered with Question No. 729.*

### **Healthcare Infrastructure Provision**

794. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health if design team services have been appointed for a proposed emergency department (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9612/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### **Health Services**

795. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently on the endoscopy waiting list at University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9615/22]

796. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently on the endoscopy waiting list for longer than 13 weeks at University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9616/22]

797. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently on the endoscopy waiting list for longer than 26 weeks at University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9617/22]

798. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently waiting on the endoscopy waiting list for longer than 52 weeks at University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9618/22]

828. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients currently waiting on the endoscopy waiting list for longer than 39 weeks at University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9825/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 795, 796, 797, 798 and 828 together.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. While significant work continues to positively impact on waiting times and improve pathways to elective care, acute hospitals have been impacted by operational challenges arising from surges in cases related to the Delta and Omicron variants.

The HSE has confirmed to the Department that patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

The Department of Health continues to work with the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) to identify ways to improve access to care, including through increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services, providing virtual clinics, and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

€350m is being allocated in 2022 to the HSE and the NTPF to primarily provide additional public and private activity to further stabilise and reduce scheduled care waiting lists and waiting times in tandem with bringing forward much needed longer-term reforms. This will supplement the core activity of the HSE as detailed in the HSE National Service Plan (NSP) 2022.

The 2022 waiting list action plan, which will be launched shortly, builds on the successes of the short-term 2021 plan that ran from September to December last year. The 2021 plan was developed by the Department of Health, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) and was driven and overseen by a senior governance group co-chaired by the Secretary General of the Department and the CEO of the HSE and met fortnightly. This rigorous level of governance and scrutiny of waiting lists has continued into this year with the oversight group evolving into the Waiting List Task Force. It has produced a comprehensive 2022 waiting list action plan which will set out high-level targets for waiting list improvement including dedicated funding for service reform, patient pathway improvement, and important significant additionality to substantially reduce the backlog of patients waiting. The taskforce will meet regularly to drive progress of the 2022 plan.

This is the first stage of an ambitious Multi-Annual Waiting List Plan, which is currently under development in my Department. Between them, these plans will work to support short, medium, and long term initiatives to reduce waiting times and provide the activity needed in years to come.

The data requested by the Deputy regarding the Endoscopy waiting list at University Hospital Kerry is outlined in the attached document which provides the waiting list for G.I.Scopes by time band on 27 Jan 2022. This information is also available on the NTPF website at: [www.ntpf.ie/home/inpatient.htm](http://www.ntpf.ie/home/inpatient.htm)

G.I. Endoscopy Waiting List at University Hospital Kerry at 27/01/2022

Time bands (months)	0-6 Mths	6-12 Mths	12-18 Mths	18+ Mths	Grand Total
Univer- sity Hospital Kerry	435	2	0	0	437

*Question No. 796 answered with Question No. 795.*

*Question No. 797 answered with Question No. 795.*

*Question No. 798 answered with Question No. 795.*

### Health Services

799. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the details of National Treatment Purchase Fund funding that was allocated in 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022 which has yet to be drawn down in respect of procedures to reduce the endoscopy waiting list at University Hospital Kerry; the dates of the allocations, the amount of funding involved and the number of procedures this funding would be expected to cover; if follow-up in respect of any failure to draw down the funding took place; if a reason for the failure to drawdown same has been provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9619/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) works with public hospitals, as opposed to with patients directly, to offer and provide the funding for treatment to clinically suitable long waiting patients who are on an inpatient/day case waiting list for surgery, having been referred on to such a list following clinical assessment by a consultant/specialist at an outpatient clinic.

The key criteria of the NTPF is the prioritisation of the longest waiting patients first. While the NTPF identifies patients eligible for NTPF treatment, it is solely on the basis of their time spent on the Inpatient/Daycase Waiting List. The clinical suitability of the patient to avail of NTPF funded treatment is determined by the public hospital.

In relation to the particular query raised by the Deputy, the NTPF has outlined in the attached tables, the number of GI Scope treatments arranged for patients on the GI waiting list at University Hospital Kerry (UHK) and the numbers of patients treated through insourcing and outsourcing in 2020 and 2021. The NTPF has advised that to date in 2022, no GI Scope treatments have been arranged for patients on the UHK GI waiting list.

In terms of activity, in 2020 136 GI Scopes were arranged through insourcing activity, with 124 patients treated. There was no outsourcing activity for GI Scopes in 2020. In 2021 treatment for 321 patients was arranged through insourcing, with 262 patients treated, while treatment for 215 patients was arranged through outsourcing, with 200 patients treated. This information is set out in the attached table, provided to my Department by the NTPF.

The NTPF has advised that a difference between the number of treatments arranged and the number of patients treated arises as patients can decline offers of treatment for a number of reasons, including because they want to remain with the public hospital, they are not clinically suitable for treatment, they no longer require treatment, or have been treated.

In 2020 €108,800 was paid to UHK for insourced GI Scope activity, while in 2021 €256,800 was paid to UHK for insourced scope activity. The NTPF has advised my Department that un-

der outsourcing arrangements the NTPF pays the private hospitals directly and as such there is no funding allocated to the public hospitals themselves.

Insourcing Funding by year	2020	2021
Amount of Funding Provided	€108,800.00	€256,800.00

GI CANs Issued to University Hospital Kerry 2020	2020	2020
	Treatments Arranged	No. of patients treated
Insourcing	136	124
Outsourcing	0	0
Total	136	124

GI CANs Issued to University Hospital Kerry 2021	2021	2021
	Treatments Arranged	No. of patients treated
Insourcing	321	262
Outsourcing	215	200
Total	536	462

CAN = Case Authorisation Number - Authorisation for Treatment issued by NTPF

### Health Services Staff

800. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the up-to-date position regarding the provision of a general practitioner service for Ballyduff, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9634/22]

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

*Question No. 801 answered with Question No. 771.*

### Health Services

802. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if motor neurone disease is classed as an illness covered under the long-term illness scheme. if not, if this illness will be classed accordingly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9651/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Long Term Illness (LTI) scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended). Regulations were made in 1971, 1973 and 1975, prescribing 16 illnesses covered by the scheme. These are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide.

Under the Scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances

directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge.

While there are no plans currently to extend the list of conditions covered, the LTI scheme will be included as part of a review of the current eligibility framework, including the basis for existing hospital and medication charges, to be carried out under commitments given in the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy.

In the meantime, for people who are not eligible for the LTI scheme, there are other arrangements which protect them from excessive medicine costs.

Under the Drugs Payment Scheme (DPS), no individual or family pays more than €100 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The maximum payable under the Drugs Payment Scheme will be further reduced to €80 per month from 1 March 2022. The scheme significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be eligible for a medical card. In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. In certain circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card, even though an applicant exceeds the income guidelines, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from illness.

In circumstances where an applicant is still over the income limit for a medical card, they are then assessed for a GP visit card, which entitles the applicant to GP visits without charge.

Individuals may also be entitled to claim tax relief on the cost of their medical expenses. This includes medicines prescribed by a doctor, dentist, or consultant. Relief is at the standard tax rate of 20%.

### **Health Service Executive**

803. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of Consultant Applications Advisory Committee-approved consultant posts across each specialty by location; the basis on which they are filled as per the doctors integrated management E-system by discipline and tenure; the number on post-2012 pay rates; the number of each type of contract, that is, Sláintecare public-only, A, B and C across specialties filled and or allocated for all posts in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9652/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the data sought, I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Tribunals of Inquiry**

804. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of claims which have been made to the CervicalCheck Tribunal; when the tribunal will cease to accept new claims; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9654/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The CervicalCheck Tribunal was established on 27 October 2020 under the CervicalCheck Tribunal Act 2019. Establishment of the Tribunal was finalised with the appointment of the nominated members to the Tribunal with effect from 1 December 2020. The Tribunal has notified my Department that it has received 19

claims to date. The figure includes two claims that were consolidated. The claims received are a combination of new claims i.e. claims that were not the subject of proceedings before the High Court, and claims transferred from the High Court. On 24 January 2022, I made an order under the CervicalCheck Tribunal Act 2019 to extend the closing date for receipt of claims by the Tribunal to 26 July 2022. The Act does not provide for a further extension of this date (i.e. post July 2022). The Tribunal has successfully brought a number of claims to conclusion swiftly and I am confident it can continue to do so.

The Tribunal implements in full the recommendations of Mr Justice Meenan in his report as an alternative system to the courts for eligible women. While it is a matter for individuals to decide whether or not to use the Tribunal, I hope that the effectiveness of the Tribunal in quickly resolving claims it has received to date will provide assurance to eligible women who are considering having their claim dealt with by the Tribunal

### **Health Services Staff**

805. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE provides peer support workers in the mental health services in Cork; if so, if the HSE will provide the number of posts available in Cork, the locations of such posts and the work involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9665/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

806. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the reason there are no neurology services such as regular monthly clinics or case studies provided at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Navan, County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9730/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

807. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the number of dental treatment service scheme contracts held in total and in each CHO area in each of the years 2017 to 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9753/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

808. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists that have resigned from the dental treatment services scheme in each of the years 2011 to 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9754/22]

**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 Staff**

809. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider an independent chair for the discussions between the HSE and an association (details supplied) in reforming the dental treatment services scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9755/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Officials from my Department and from the HSE have held two rounds of discussions with the IDA, the most recent on 17 December last when my Department and the HSE presented proposals to invest additional resources in the Dental Treatment Services Scheme, including €10m provided in the Budget, on top of the 2022 Estimate allocation of €56 million.

The Department / HSE has offered increased fees across a number of items and proposed the reintroduction of the Scale and Polish item.

These proposals were expedited to address not only the problem of access for patients, but also concerns expressed by dentists about the viability of the DTSS, and to some extent, to bring about alignment with the Dental Treatment Benefits Scheme, which is widely operated by dentists for PRSI patients.

I have instructed my officials to arrange a further engagement with the Irish Dental Association to progress solutions.

### **Dental Services**

810. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the number of students across 1st, 4th and 6th class primary school children that attended dental screening appointments respectively in each of the years 2017 to 2021 and in each CHO area in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9756/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

811. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the number of primary students that have missed their public dental screening appointments in each of the years 2019 to 2021 per CHO area in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9757/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

812. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the number of 1st, 4th and 6th class primary school children respectively on waiting lists to access the schools dental screen-

ing programme to year end 2021 in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9758/22]

**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 Strategies

813. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if he has asked the women's health task force to consider funding options for first line medications for hyperemesis gravidarum; and if so, when the group's review will be complete. [9762/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Important work in this area has commenced in the HSE and officials are engaged with the HSE to progress this work in line with the Ministers request for urgent consideration of this matter.

This is a key first step in considering options which can better support women suffering with hyperemesis in Ireland.

Although there are challenging licensing and reimbursement issues which need to be worked through, the Department and the HSE are fully committed to a programme of work on Women's Health, in particular Maternal Health. Support for hyperemesis will be prioritised through this programme and officials supporting Women's Health in both organisations are working with urgency to identify all of the available options to better support this cohort of women.

### Medicinal Products

814. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if pyridoxine and doxylamine is considered a food supplement rather than a medical product in Ireland; if so, the reason that it is considered a food supplement; if this labelling of pyridoxine and doxylamine as a food product is standard international practice in other countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9763/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Firstly, I would like to provide a status update on the ongoing work that the HSE is carrying out in relation to Cariban. The Medicines Management Programme (MMP) has submitted a clinical review and the HSE are now considering if there are potential reimbursement options based on the MMP's recommendations. I am hopeful that the HSE can achieve a positive outcome and my Department and the HSE are continuing to work closely together on this issue.

In order to address the question raised by this PQ, I need to provide an updated position on the classification of Cariban. The position previously presented by me and my Department was based on inaccurate information we received.

My officials recently contacted Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), which is the competent authority for medicinal products in Ireland, to seek advice in relation to the classification of Cariban. On 18 February 2022 the HPRA advised my Department that while Cariban does contain Pyridoxine hydrochloride which, as per Directive 2002/46/EC, is permitted for use in the manufacture of food supplements, it also contains doxylamine succinate which is an antihistamine. Therefore, the HPRA has said that Cariban is classified as a medicinal product, not a food supplement. Furthermore, Cariban is classified as a medicinal product as it meets the definition of a medicinal product under Article 1 of Directive 2001/83/EC as amended by

Directive 2004/27/EC.

The HPRA have also advised that Cariban is currently not licensed for use in Ireland. There are three similar products, Xonvea (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg), Navalem (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg) and Doxylamine/Pyridoxine Exeltis 10 mg/10 mg gastro-resistant tablets (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg) that are licensed for use in Ireland. However, the companies holding the authorisations/licences have not marketed the products in Ireland to date, and the HPRA cannot compel a company to market a medicinal product. Similar to Cariban, all three of these products are classified as medicinal products, not food supplements.

I sincerely apologise to the House for presenting information in relation to the classification of Cariban that I now know to be inaccurate. Unfortunately, I only became aware that the information was inaccurate in recent days.

### **Health Services**

815. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of occasions and dates on which the Sláintecare programme board has met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9780/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Responsibility for the implementation of Sláintecare projects is now devolved to a senior leadership team within my Department. To ensure that implementation is fully embedded across the Department and that the drive for universal healthcare is embedded across both the Department of Health and the HSE, a new Programme Board has been established. Reporting to me, the Board is co-chaired by the Secretary-General of the Department and the Chief Executive Officer of the HSE and also comprises senior members of the Department's Management Board and the HSE's Executive Management Teams responsible for the delivery of specific Sláintecare projects and programmes. The Secretary General, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is also a member of the Board.

The Board met on two occasions since its establishment, on 15 December 2021 and 14 February 2022. It is anticipated that the Board will meet on a bi-monthly (every other month) basis.

### **Health Services**

816. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each community healthcare organisation area per primary care centre currently waiting for a podiatry appointment in tabular form. [9782/22]

**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 Staff**

817. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of podiatrists employed in each CHO by each individual primary care centre; the vacancies, if any, to be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9783/22]

**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 Service Executive

818. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status of the HSE chronic disease management community hubs; the status of the recruitment process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9784/22]

*Awaiting reply from Department.*

### Health Services

819. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the podiatry waiting list by location and waiting time by month in counties Louth and Meath in January 2021 and January 2022; the number of HSE podiatry clinics by location; the number of staff employed; the number of vacancies for podiatrists by location; when these vacancies will be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9785/22]

**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 Strategies

820. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a full update on the implementation to date of the National Cancer Strategy Implementation Report since its publication on 5 May 2021; the way he plans to reduce the overall cost to persons being treated for cancer in cases in which they do not have private health insurance or medical cards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9789/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The implementation of the National Cancer Strategy is a Programme for Government commitment and is part of the implementation of Sláintecare. We have seen significant progress on the implementation of the Strategy over the past four years, with clear evidence-based policy direction from my Department and strong implementation by the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP).

As noted by the Deputy, the *National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 Implementation Report 2020* was published on 5th May 2021. This sets out the progress achieved on the implementation of the 52 recommendations of the Strategy, and the degree to which the key performance indicators are being met, to the end of 2020.

The *National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 Implementation Report 2021* is currently under development and it is hoped that this Report will be published in the coming weeks.

The annual Implementation Report will detail progress made to end 2021, including:

- Implementation of new GP e-referral system for symptomatic breast disease clinics introduced;

- 26 acute oncology nurses in place in the 26 SACT hospitals to assist with ED avoidance for cancer patients;

- Adult CAR-T services repatriated to St. James's Hospital;
- New radiation oncology facility in CUH fully operational, and construction continuing for the new Galway facility;
- Development and dissemination of best practice guidelines for community cancer support centres; and
- Continuation of the Together 4 Cancer Concern psychological service.

This Government is acutely aware of the costs associated with a diagnosis of cancer, or indeed any long-term illness. The Government's commitment to Sláintecare reform is clear and unwavering – Sláintecare is putting people at the centre of the health system and working towards universal healthcare for all, where people can access the right services based on need and not ability to pay. We will continue to have an ongoing focus on the quality and affordability of healthcare focusing on the continued implementation of clinical strategies, including the *National Cancer Strategy*, and on delivering on the eligibility commitments in Budget 2022.

### Medical Cards

821. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if the three-year grace period for a holder of an over 70s medical card following the death of their spouse remains in place; if he can ensure that this information is explicitly stated on the HSE website and information leaflets and not just in the guidance documents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9790/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Eligibility for a Medical Card is determined by the HSE in accordance with the Health Act 1970 (as amended). Surviving persons of medical card holders who satisfied the eligibility criteria in the Health Act 1970 (as amended) for persons aged 70 and over, may retain their medical card for three years following the death of that other person, subject to certain criteria, as set out in the Health Act 1970 (as amended). In relation to the availability and method of communicating medical card information by the HSE, 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

822. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospitalisations in 2021 linked specifically to long-Covid, broken down by hospital, age and gender in tabular form. [9793/22]

**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.

### Dental Services

823. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on his and his Departments discussions with an association (details supplied) in respect of the provision of appropriate dental services for medical card holders; the date he will next meet with the association; the way he will address the urgent crisis in counties Louth and Meath in which over

two thirds of registered dentists have left the general medical service scheme since 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9808/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My immediate priority is to seek to address the current situation of medical card patients experiencing problems in accessing treatment.

In that respect, officials from my Department and from the HSE have held two rounds of discussions with the IDA, the most recent on 17 December last when my Department and the HSE presented proposals to invest additional resources in the Dental Treatment Services Scheme, including €10m provided in the Budget, on top of the 2022 Estimate allocation of €56 million.

The Department / HSE has offered increased fees across a number of items and proposed the reintroduction of the Scale and Polish item.

These proposals were expedited to address not only the problem of access for patients, but also concerns expressed by dentists about the viability of the DTSS, and to some extent, to bring about alignment with the Dental Treatment Benefits Scheme, which is widely operated by dentists for PRSI patients.

The Department wishes to move the process on, in the interests of patients, and is hoping to meet the IDA again in the next couple of weeks to progress matters.

In the meantime, I have been assured that the HSE Public Dental Service is seeking to provide emergency cover for any medical card patients who are experiencing problems in accessing a service from their local dentist.

### **Disability Services**

824. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to regulation of resident and family forums; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9813/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE supports the provision of Family Forums with The Social Care Division Intellectual Disability Residential Service, Allocated Service Framework for the Development of a Residents Forum. This framework which was developed by the National Disability Services, Quality Improvement Team in 2017, outlines the principals and steps that need to be considered when developing a Residents Forum in residential services within an Allocated Service area. This document was widely circulated for use in residential centres. The document can also be adapted when setting up forums in other types of services, for example, day services.

HIQA's Guidance on the assessment of fitness for designated centres (Jan 2018) states that the provider must demonstrate the governance arrangements they have in place to include a responsive quality assurance framework. Arrangements should also confirm resident and family forums,

Current regulations do not specifically require a registered provider to have a family forum in place, nonetheless, inspectors do look to see that providers engage directly with residents and families in line with residents' expressed wishes and consent. In doing so inspectors review:

- residents care records to ensure that residents and, where appropriate, families, are included in the required reviews of resident care plans- records of complaints received to ensure that

issues raised by residents and families are addressed in a timely and appropriate fashion- how residents and families are consulted with in the preparation of the annual review of the quality and safety of resident care.

Inspectors liaise with residents to hear how they are supported to maintain family and community links based on their wishes.

Inspectors also engage with residents to discuss their experiences of living in the Centre and how the provider and staff engage with them regarding decisions on how the designated Centre operates.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

825. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if an antigen test confirming that a person had Covid-19 can be used to obtain a recovery certificate recognised for EU travel purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9815/22]

868. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Health the way that persons aged 4 to 39 years that followed public health guidance and used antigen tests to detect Covid-19 positivity following onset of symptoms, can now obtain a Covid Recovery Certificate (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9994/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 825 and 868 together.

The EU Digital COVID Certificate Regulation (EU) 2021/953 creates a framework for the issuing, authentication, and validity of certificates. Under the scope and parameters laid out in the EU DCC Regulation, DCCs for recovery cannot currently be issued on the basis of an antigen test.

There was very significant demand for PCR testing during December and into January due to unprecedented levels of infection in the community, largely driven by the Omicron variant and reflecting both the high prevalence of the disease and also other respiratory illnesses at the time. The HSE made every effort necessary to address this very significant demand arising for PCR testing. This included making arrangements with private providers to add capacity, extending the opening hours of swabbing centres and ongoing recruitment and redeployment to swabbing teams, and increasing the number of National Ambulance Service mobile teams.

Due to demands on PCR capacity reaching the levels they did, changes were necessary to public health guidance, making antigen tests more widely available and allowing the HSE to prioritise access to PCR testing for those most vulnerable to the disease.

Information on travel requirements within Europe is available at the Re-Open EU webpage: [reopen.europa.eu/en](https://reopen.europa.eu/en)

### **Medicinal Products**

826. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Health if drugs (details supplied) are certified for prescription at pharmacies in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9816/22]

**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.

### **Care Services**

827. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 678 of 8 February 2022, if HIQA has taken action in relation to the residential nursing homes or designated residential disability centres that did not report the six situations of alleged sexual abuse allegations to An Garda Síochána which subsequently HIQA did report to An Garda Síochána; the nature and outcome of such actions by HIQA with each individual home or centre; if mandatory reporting will be introduced for such incidents in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9822/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am advised by the Health Information and Quality Authority that in six situations since 2015, inspectors found that the provider of a designated centre had not made an appropriate referral to An Garda Síochána. HIQA subsequently referred these allegations to An Garda Síochána.

It is important to note that these referrals were in addition to the measures taken by HIQA requiring the provider to implement actions to ensure the safety of residents. All safeguarding issues are reviewed as a matter of priority to determine the most appropriate regulatory action. In situations where substantiated safeguarding issues are identified, providers are required to take action to ensure the safety of residents. If immediate risks to the safety of residents are identified, providers must take immediate action to address these issues and to prevent a recurrence.

In all situations, including the six referred to above, the Chief Inspector continues to monitor the actions of the provider to ensure they are effective in addressing the safeguarding concerns. The Chief Inspector can, and has, taken further action, up to and including the cancellation of registration, where providers fail to sustain improvements to residents' safety.

Significant work is ongoing to develop a national policy on adult safeguarding in the health sector. It is expected that the policy will address, inter alia, appropriate reporting arrangements. Legislation as required to underpin the policy will be prepared subject to its approval by Government.

I would like to acknowledge my appreciation for HIQA's participation in and important ongoing contribution to the high-level Steering Group which was established to assist and advise my Department in its development of a national adult safeguarding policy for the health sector and I welcome the Authority's strong support in this regard.

*Question No. 828 answered with Question No. 795.*

### **Public Services Provision**

829. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9835/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Department of Health has not won any award from Public Sector Magazine.

## **Energy Usage**

830. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the energy rating of the new national maternity hospital; if it will comply with the EU energy performance of buildings directive and meet its own target of an A3 rating as set out in its plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9844/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is an operational matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

## **Health Service Executive**

831. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken or in hand to deal with any backlog of concerns pertaining to the protection of adults at risk of abuse in CHO7, Kildare, Wicklow and Dublin with particular reference to the need to protect those most vulnerable in our society; if CHO7 is adequately resourced with the number of social workers to ensure the proper safeguarding of adults at risk of abuse; the plans to increase the number of staff in the CHO7 area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9847/22]

**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**

832. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that received an invitation to take part in BreastCheck on a quarterly basis from quarter 1 2020 to date in 2022; and the percentage of persons that accepted an invitation and subsequently attended a screening appointment in each of the specified periods in tabular form. [9863/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

## **Health Services**

833. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that received an invitation to take part in BowelScreen on a quarterly basis from quarter 1 2020 to date in 2022; the percentage of persons that accepted an invitation and subsequently attended a screening appointment in each of the specified periods in tabular form. [9864/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

## **Health Services**

834. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that received an invitation to take part in CervicalCheck on a quarterly basis from quarter 1 2020 to date in 2022; the percentage of persons that accepted an invitation and subsequently attended a screening appointment in each of the specified periods in tabular form. [9865/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

### Health Services

835. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review a report (details supplied); when this office will reopen to the public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9866/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services

836. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the total annual spend on BreastCheck in each of the years 2017 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9876/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

### Health Services

837. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the total annual spend on CervicalCheck in each of the years 2017 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9877/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

### Health Services

838. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of reducing the BreastCheck screening age to 40; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9878/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am fully committed to supporting our population screening programmes which are a valuable part of our health service, enabling early treatment and care for many people, and improving the overall health of our population.

I am pleased to inform that, in line with commitments in the Programme for Government, BreastCheck are now implementing the commitment on age-extension so that all women aged between 50 to 69 years are invited for routine breast screening. BreastCheck invite this age category because international evidence shows the incidence and mortality from breast cancer in this age group means it is effective to screen women in this age range.

The National Screening Service (NSS) also advises that BreastCheck delivers its services in line with international criteria for screening programmes, based on the best international evidence, which they kept under constant review.

Regarding any further changing or lowering the age eligibility for BreastCheck, it is important to note that any future decisions about changes to our national screening programmes, including reducing the age range in breast screening, will be made on the advice of our National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC). This independent expert group considers and assesses evidence in a robust and transparent manner, and against internationally accepted criteria. It is important we have rigorous processes in place to ensure our screening programmes are effective, quality assured and operating to safe standards, and that the benefits of screening outweigh the harms.

A dedicated evidence assessment team in HIQA support the work of the NSAC and conduct evidence reviews and evaluations to inform the decisions of the NSAC. The financial cost is but one factor that is considered in the decision-making process. Due to the complex nature of the evaluation process and the criteria against which a decision is made, it would not be possible to accurately quantify the cost of expanding a screening service until a full evidential assessment was completed.

It may be of interest that the NSAC recently held its first ‘Annual Call’ which gave the public an opportunity to suggest new screening programmes or modifications to existing ones. I am looking forward to receiving recommendations from the NSAC once they have considered the submissions received, and I will be guided by their advice to ensure Ireland’s population-based screening programmes continues to evolve in line with new evidence and developments.

It is an important message to remind that screening is for healthy people without symptoms. If anyone becomes aware of symptoms, or if they have concerns or worries, they should contact their GP who will arrange appropriate follow-up care. It is important that every woman is breast aware. This means knowing what is normal for them so that if any unusual change occurs, they will recognise it. The National Screening Service and BreastCheck have useful information in relation to breast health on their website.

### **Health Services**

839. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the total number of beds in Belmullet Community Hospital in each year since 2008, in tabular form; the array of treatments and care provided at the Belmullet campus in each year since 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9879/22]

840. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when the anticipated return from 12 to 20 beds, as was in place prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Belmullet Community Hospital, will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9880/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 839 and 840 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. 840 answered with Question No. 839.*

### **Healthcare Infrastructure Provision**

841. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the total capital invest-

ment in Belmullet Community Hospital in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9881/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### Hospital Services

842. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent medical and non-medical staff in Belmullet Community Hospital since 2008, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9882/22]

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

### Departmental Correspondence

843. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied). [9883/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### Hospital Appointments Status

844. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect an appointment. [9886/22]

**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.

### Ambulance Service

845. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health the work to be carried out at the National Ambulance Service base, Carlow arising from a recent inspection which focused on fire prevention and safety; if the works have been costed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9899/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

## **Dental Services**

846. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists with dental treatment services scheme contracts at the end of each quarter of 2019, 2020, 2021 and for the first of each month to date in 2022, by CHO in tabular form; and the number of dentists with active contracts, that is, the number of dentists who submitted claims for each of these months. [9900/22]

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

## **Hospital Staff**

847. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the number of neurology nurse specialists currently working in Sligo University Hospital; if he has plans to increase the number of neurology nurse specialists in the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9906/22]

**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 Staff**

848. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the number of podiatrists employed by the HSE by CHO area in each of the years 2017 to 2021; the shortfall in podiatrists employed by the HSE by CHO area in tabular form; the number of podiatrist posts planned in Budget 2021; the number of these posts that were not filled; the reason that posts were not filled; the status of his plans to improve podiatry services in each CHO area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9907/22]

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

## **Hospital Services**

849. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons diagnosed with colorectal cancer at stage I, stage II, stage III and stage IV in each year since 2014, in tabular form. [9925/22]

850. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons diagnosed with breast cancer at stage I, stage II, stage III and stage IV in each year since 2014 in tabular form. [9926/22]

851. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons diagnosed with cervical cancer at stage I, stage II, stage III and stage IV in each year since 2014, in tabular form. [9927/22]

852. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons diagnosed with ovarian cancer at stage I, stage II, stage III and stage IV in each year since 2014, in tabular form. [9928/22]

854. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of cancers diagnosed by stage in each year since 2013, in tabular form. [9930/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 849, 850, 851, 852 and 854 together.

The National Cancer Registry Ireland (NCRI) is charged with collecting and classifying information on all cancer cases that occur in Ireland. NCRI data is used widely in the development of cancer services, service planning and in monitoring progress being made under the National Cancer Strategy.

Based on the most recent staging data provided by the NCRI, the stage at diagnosis for breast, lung, colorectal, cervical and ovarian cancer (2014-2018) is as follows:

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-02-22\_pq849-850-851-852-854-22-02-2022\_en.docx">cancerdiagnosis</a>]

These figures relate to the stage at the time of the patient's initial diagnosis, or within a window of up to 4 months after diagnosis date.

Proportions of cases with unknown (as-yet-unassigned) stage is higher in the most recent years reflecting incompleteness of clinical stage information for 2018 at the time of analysis.

It is possible that a small number of late registrations of Stage IV cases may be added as data is further validated.

*Question No. 850 answered with Question No. 849.*

*Question No. 851 answered with Question No. 849.*

*Question No. 852 answered with Question No. 849.*

### **Hospital Services**

853. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of cancers by type diagnosed in emergency departments since 2014, in tabular form. [9929/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In 2018, the National Cancer Registry Ireland (NCRI), in conjunction with the Irish Cancer Society (ICS) published a report entitled "Diagnosing Cancer in an Emergency: Patterns of Emergency Presentation in Ireland 2002-2015".

This Report showed that the percentage of cancers presenting as emergencies has fallen from 20% (2002-2005) to 14% (2009-2015). Based on updated NCRI analyses, and excluding cases whose mode of presentation was not known, most recently available data shows that emergency presentations accounted for 13.9% of cases diagnosed during 2015-2017. No breakdown of emergency presentation by year is yet available through the NCRI.

The National Cancer Strategy contains recommendations that specifically seek to improve awareness of symptoms. The combined approach of early detection, awareness and education campaigns (with particular focus on those most at risk), and cancer prevention measures will work to reduce the number of cancers presenting as emergencies, as well as ensuring that the public remain informed of lifestyle changes that can reduce their risk of developing cancer.

*Question No. 854 answered with Question No. 849.*

### Dental Services

855. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the dental appointment waiting list in County Wexford; the average waiting time for appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9934/22]

**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.

### Dental Services

856. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists that held contracts for the dental treatment service scheme in County Wexford at December 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9935/22]

**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

857. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health when a Covid-19 vaccine (details supplied) will be rolled out across the State given that it was approved by the European Medicines Agency in 2021. [9939/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to the Department of Health. The NIAC review all data relating to COVID-19 vaccines on a rolling basis.

Following the recommendation for use of vaccines against COVID-19 by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and authorisation for use by the European Commission, the NIAC develops guidance for their use in Ireland which is contained in the Immunisation Guidelines for Ireland. These guidelines are continuously updated and include guidance on all new vaccines as they are approved for use in Ireland.

You can view the updated guidelines here: [www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf](http://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf)

Following the EMA granting of conditional marketing authorisation for Novavax's COVID-19 vaccine Nuvaxovid (also known as NVX-CoV2373), NIAC has recommended that this vaccine can be used in those aged 18 years of age and older.

NIAC guidance received on 27th January recommended that Nuvaxovid (Novavax) may be offered to those who have a contraindication to an mRNA vaccine, or who have chosen not to receive another COVID-19 vaccine course. Specific clinical guidance on the use of this vaccine is being developed by National Immunisation Office (NIO) and the HSE will now work to operationalise these updates.

*Question No. 858 answered with Question No. 756.*

## Departmental Communications

859. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health if he uses an application on his official Government phone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application on his phone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9962/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As I have previously stated I do not use text messaging or social media apps to conduct Government business.

I can confirm that I do have WhatsApp and I do not have the disappearing message setting activated on the application on my phone.

## Health Services

860. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider allowing those who live alone to benefit from the recent decrease to the drugs payment scheme on a pro-rata basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9971/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Drug Payment Scheme (DPS) provides for the refund of the amount by which expenditure on approved prescribed medicines or medical and surgical appliances exceeds a named threshold in any calendar month. The DPS significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

The DPS monthly threshold was reduced by €14 from €114 to €100 on 1 January 2022. On 10 February 2022, the Government announced a further reduction from €100 to €80. This will be effective from 1 March 2022.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services may be eligible for a medical card. In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. In certain circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card, even though an applicant exceeds the income guidelines, where he or she faces difficult financial circumstances, such as extra costs arising from illness. In circumstances where an applicant is still over the income limit for a medical card, they are then assessed for a GP visit card, which entitles the applicant to GP visits without charge. Persons may also be entitled to claim tax relief on the cost of their medical expenses, including medicines prescribed by a doctor, dentist, or consultant. Relief is at the standard tax rate of 20%.

## Dental Services

861. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) in County Cork is entitled to orthodontic dental treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9973/22]

**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

862. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if there are mental health experts currently placed in children's accident and emergency departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9979/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Departmental Schemes

863. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health when he will bring forward the replacement of the mobility allowance scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9713/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Government decided to close the *Motorised Transport Grant* and *Mobility Allowance* administrative Schemes in 2013, on foot of the Ombudsman reports in 2011 and 2012 regarding the legal status of both Schemes in the context of the Equal Status Acts.

Under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 - 2021, the Department of Transport has responsibility for the continued development of the availability of accessible public transport and is committed to this in recognition of the importance of such services to the lives of people with disabilities.

Work is continuing on the policy proposals for the provision of transport supports for people with disabilities. Recent developments which will impact on the policy options include the following:

- The ongoing progress by the Department of Transport in providing accessible public transport nationally and that Department's review of active travel and public transport policy, including accessible public transport;

- The Cost of Disability Study, commissioned by the Department of Social Protection, which will inform policy direction in relation to the provision of adequate supports to meet the needs of people with disabilities, including transport costs;

- The Working Group established under Action 104 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, which is now under the remit of the Department of Children, Equality, Disabilities, Integration and Youth, to lead a review of all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities. The Working Group was reconvened on 26 January, 2022; and

- The Department of Finance's commitment to review the *Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme*.

### Medicinal Products

864. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 77 of 15 February 2022, when cariban was classified as a food supplement rather than a medicine; if it was always classified as a food supplement in Ireland; the metrics under which this classification was awarded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9987/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Firstly, I would like to provide a status

update on the ongoing work that the HSE is carrying out in relation to Cariban. The Medicines Management Programme (MMP) has submitted a clinical review and the HSE are now considering if there are potential reimbursement options based on the MMP's recommendations. I am hopeful that the HSE can achieve a positive outcome and my Department and the HSE are continuing to work closely together on this issue.

In order to address the question raised by this PQ, I need to provide an updated position on the classification of Cariban. The position previously presented by me and my Department was based on inaccurate information we received.

My officials recently contacted Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), which is the competent authority for medicinal products in Ireland, to seek advice in relation to the classification of Cariban. On 18 February 2022 the HPRA advised my Department that while Cariban does contain Pyridoxine hydrochloride which, as per Directive 2002/46/EC, is permitted for use in the manufacture of food supplements, it also contains doxylamine succinate which is an antihistamine. Therefore, the HPRA has said that Cariban is classified as a medicinal product, not a food supplement. Furthermore, Cariban is classified as a medicinal product as it meets the definition of a medicinal product under Article 1 of Directive 2001/83/EC as amended by Directive 2004/27/EC.

The HPRA have also advised that Cariban is currently not licensed for use in Ireland. There are three similar products, Xonvea (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg), Navalem (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg) and Doxylamine/Pyridoxine Exeltis 10 mg/10 mg gastro-resistant tablets (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg) that are licensed for use in Ireland. However, the companies holding the authorisations/licences have not marketed the products in Ireland to date, and the HPRA cannot compel a company to market a medicinal product. Similar to Cariban, all three of these products are classified as medicinal products, not food supplements.

I sincerely apologise to the House for presenting information in relation to the classification of Cariban that I now know to be inaccurate. Unfortunately, I only became aware that the information was inaccurate in recent days.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

865. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health if any progress has been made rolling out continuous glucose monitors or flash glucose monitors to persons living with type 1 diabetes recognising the better blood glucose control they offer and potential to reduce long term complications as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9990/22]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

866. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the reason for a discontinuation of dental treatment for medical card holders in Kiltrush, County Clare; when he expects this service to be reinstated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9991/22]

**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**

867. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he intends to lift the mandate for mask wearing in national schools for children and teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9993/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, the NPHE met on 17 February and it has provided advice to Government in relation to remaining public health measures. These measures include the requirements for mask wearing in all settings where currently regulated for under Statutory Instrument as well as public health measures in schools, early learning and care facilities. Government will make a decision on this shortly.

*Question No. 868 answered with Question No. 825.*

### **Health Service Executive**

869. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide copies of all general written directives issued to the HSE executive or board under section 10 (1) of the Health Act 2004 in the past five years. [10011/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The information requested by the Deputy is not immediately available. I will survey the Department and the collated replies will be prepared into a full response to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

870. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if copies of all documents furnished to the HSE under section 10A (3) of the Health Act 2004 in the past five years will be provided, specifying priorities to which the HSE must have regard in preparing or amending its service plan or specifying performance targets for the HSE in respect of those priorities. [10012/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** To support the development of the National Service Plan by the HSE, documentation has been issued to the HSE setting out an annual statement of priorities. Copies of relevant material requested by the Deputy will be collated and a full response will issue to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

871. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if copies of all documents consisting of or relating to matters (details supplied) will be provided. [10013/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The provisions of the Health Act 2004 (as amended) quoted by the Deputy provide me with a number of legislative powers including directing the HSE to amend a submitted National Service Plan, amending an approved National Service Plan and the submission of Capital Plans. Copies of all this documentation requested by the Deputy is not immediately available. I will survey the Department and the collated replies will be prepared into a full response to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Service Executive**

22 February 2022

872. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his policies and objectives (details supplied) which relate to the functions of the HSE and that were communicated in writing to the HSE being policies and objectives to which the HSE was obliged to have regard in preparing its current service plan and its current capital plan. [10014/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The information requested by the Deputy is not immediately available. I will survey the Department and the collated replies will be prepared into a full response to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

873. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will receive an appointment for orthodontic treatment. [10023/22]

**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**

874. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if there is a plan for improving podiatry services in south-western areas of County Cork for persons with diabetes; the plans that are in place to address the staff shortage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10027/22]

**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.

### **Home Care Packages**

875. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive a palliative care package which would enable them to be discharged from hospital and to return home to their family. [10029/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Nursing Homes**

876. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health when long term residential care will be provided for a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [10047/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I am referring the question for response to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

877. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time physiothera-

pists employed per CHO area in tabular form. [10053/22]

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

### **Health Services Staff**

878. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time occupational therapists employed per CHO area in tabular form. [10054/22]

**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 Staff**

879. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time dentists employed per CHO area in tabular form. [10055/22]

**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 Staff**

880. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has plans to incentivise recently qualified medical and nursing graduates who received State resources during their education to stay in Ireland for a few years before they travel if they choose to. [10056/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Recruitment and retention of recently qualified healthcare workers is a key priority. All recently qualified nursing graduates were offered permanent contracts of employment in 2020 and 2021. It is expected that the 2022 graduates will also be offered permanent contracts. These nurses and midwives, after one year and 16 weeks' suitable experience, will be eligible to apply for the enhanced nurse-midwife role and salary scale.

Retention efforts by the HSE both nationally and locally are in place with significant career development and progression and educational/development opportunities being offered. The Department is working with the National Doctors Training and Planning (NDTP) Office of the HSE in relation to medical workforce planning and initiatives aimed at increasing opportunities for training and career progression for trainee doctors. Opportunities for training and career progression for doctors in the Irish Health system continue to evolve. Examples of the initiatives include:

- The Introduction of the online National Employment Record (NER) has now eliminated the requirement for duplication of paperwork associated with NCHD rotations.

- Enhanced Financial Supports: The Training Support Scheme (TSS), introduced in July 2019, provides reimbursement for approved exams, courses or conferences and is open to all NCHDs. Since July 2019 the full costs of approved examination/courses are eligible for refund to NCHDs under the Clinical Course Exam Refund Scheme (CCERS), this was previously

capped at €450.

- Greater predictability of the location of rotations are now provided to trainees at the outset of training. All newly appointed trainees receive a minimum of 2 years pre-defined rotations, a minimum of 13 weeks prior to commencing training/entry to their training scheme, while trainees entering year 3 of a training scheme receive a minimum of 2 years pre-defined rotations a minimum of 13 weeks prior to commencing year 3 of the scheme.

- Increased rationalised training opportunities: A number of training schemes are moving towards more a regionalised structure of training. This is specialty dependent, but examples include the intern rotations which take place within a particular intern network and geographic location.

- Introduction of the Lead NCHD programme: The programme was introduced to provide a formal link at hospital management level between NCHDs and management, and to develop leadership capacity within NCHDs. The programme now runs across 32 acute hospitals, Community Health Organisations (CHOs), Public Health and Primary Care settings.

- Expansion of supernumerary Flexible Training HSE scheme posts: Since July 2016 the scheme has expanded from 24 to 32 annual places. The scheme has also been extended to junior trainees from year 2 BST onwards;

- NDTP have recently launched a new E-Portfolio / Logbook accessible to NCHDs via their National Employment Record. The principal objective of the E-Portfolio is to allow NCHDs who are not on a formal training scheme access to a generic standard document to record their training and career development. It also provides the opportunity to have their experience validated by their supervising Consultant where applicable.

The HSE NDTP Office is in the initial stages of work regarding doctors who completed an internship in Ireland. Early and provisional data shows that a high percentage of medical interns who graduate leave Ireland for at least one year. However, the data shows that 82% of interns who commenced one year intern training in July 2015 subsequently commenced a Basic Specialist Training (BST) or General Practice (GP) training programme in subsequent years (2016-2021). A small number of the 2015 cohort also remain in the Irish health system either in service grade posts or employed within the private healthcare sector.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

881. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the public hospitals that have the facility to take DEXA scans; the number of these DEXA scanners in each of those hospitals in question in tabular form. [10064/22]

**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 Staff**

882. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent respiratory physiotherapists working in the Mullingar Regional Hospital in 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form; and if this number will be further increased. [10065/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked

the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

883. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review correspondence (details supplied); if the appointment will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10097/22]

**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**

884. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 143 of 26 January 2022, if his Department has finalised arrangements to give effect to the Government announcement concerning the pandemic recognition payment; the position regarding the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10100/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Firstly I would again like to extend my sincere gratitude to all healthcare workers for their efforts during this most challenging period.

The Department of Health appreciates the levels of interest that this announcement has generated. We are working together with the HSE to provide additional details on this measure including full eligibility criteria, particulars and terms and conditions that apply. This will be published as soon as possible.

It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

885. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the way that healthcare workers who worked in Ireland during the pandemic who qualify for the recognition payment of €1,000 but left the country after June 2021, will receive the bonus payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10113/22]

**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 sec-

tor healthcare workers, to recognise their unique role during the pandemic. The payment of €1,000 will not be subject to income tax, USC, or PRSI. The measure will be ring fenced to staff ordinarily onsite in COVID-19 exposed healthcare environments within the period between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021.

Those public sector frontline healthcare workers eligible for the payment will be directly employed public health sector staff working in clinical settings. A pro-rata arrangement will apply for eligible part time staff / equivalents and supernumerary students who were required to perform training in clinical sites. The Department of Health will also introduce a measure for making a similar payment to staff in private sector nursing homes and hospices that were affected by Covid-19.

The Department of Health appreciates the levels of interest this announcement has generated. We are working together with the HSE to provide additional details on this measure including full eligibility criteria, particulars and terms and conditions that apply. This will be published as soon as possible.

It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

### **Health Services Staff**

886. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide subsidised English classes and the occupational English test and international English language testing system exams for non-native English speakers who are working in public healthcare settings. [10118/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** At present there are no plans to provide subsidised English classes and the occupational English test and international English language testing system exams for non-native English speakers who are working in public healthcare settings.

However, in the further education and training (FET) sector, all 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) offer free English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, as part of their Adult Literacy provision, to meet the day-to-day social, cultural and work-related language needs of new community members. Priority is given to unemployed migrants, international protection applicants and refugees with limited or no English language skills. People interested in taking part in an ESOL class are encouraged to contact their local ETB. Contact details for the 16 ETBs can be found at [www.therightcourse.gov.ie](http://www.therightcourse.gov.ie).

The deputy may wish to note that Minister Butler, Minister of State for Mental Health and Older People is establishing a cross-Departmental Strategic Workforce Advisory Group to examine strategic workforce challenges in front-line carer roles in home support and nursing homes.

The work of this Group will focus on engagement with relevant stakeholders in the sector and will involve a structured programme of ongoing consultative engagements with key sectoral stakeholders to further explore and define the issues, listen to stakeholder views, and identify approaches to respond to strategic workforce challenges.

Potential areas to be considered by the Group include recruitment, retention, training, and the career development of front-line carers in home support and nursing homes into the future. Without pre-empting the work of Strategic Workforce Advisory Group, provision of supports

to workers, where English is not their first language, to access education and training may also form part of these considerations.

### **Eating Disorders**

887. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of special public beds for eating disorders in each CHO; the number of consultants and multidisciplinary teams with expertise to treat eating disorders in each CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10119/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Medicinal Products**

888. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the reason that pyridoxine and doxylamine which is only available on prescription is classified as a food supplement and not a medicine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10120/22]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Firstly, I would like to provide a status update on the ongoing work that the HSE is carrying out in relation to Cariban. The Medicines Management Programme (MMP) has submitted a clinical review and the HSE are now considering if there are potential reimbursement options based on the MMP's recommendations. I am hopeful that the HSE can achieve a positive outcome and my Department and the HSE are continuing to work closely together on this issue.

In order to address the question raised by this PQ, I need to provide an updated position on the classification of Cariban. The position previously presented by me and my Department was based on inaccurate information we received.

My officials recently contacted Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), which is the competent authority for medicinal products in Ireland, to seek advice in relation to the classification of Cariban. On 18 February 2022 the HPRA advised my Department that while Cariban does contain Pyridoxine hydrochloride which, as per Directive 2002/46/EC, is permitted for use in the manufacture of food supplements, it also contains doxylamine succinate which is an antihistamine. Therefore, the HPRA has said that Cariban is classified as a medicinal product, not a food supplement. Furthermore, Cariban is classified as a medicinal product as it meets the definition of a medicinal product under Article 1 of Directive 2001/83/EC as amended by Directive 2004/27/EC.

The HPRA have also advised that Cariban is currently not licensed for use in Ireland. There are three similar products, Xonvea (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg), Navalem (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg) and Doxylamine/Pyridoxine Exeltis 10 mg/10 mg gastro-resistant tablets (doxylamine 10 mg and pyridoxine 10 mg) that are licensed for use in Ireland. However, the companies holding the authorisations/licences have not marketed the products in Ireland to date, and the HPRA cannot compel a company to market a medicinal product. Similar to Cariban, all three of these products are classified as medicinal products, not food supplements.

I sincerely apologise to the House for presenting information in relation to the classifica-

tion of Cariban that I now know to be inaccurate. Unfortunately, I only became aware that the information was inaccurate in recent days.

### **Medicinal Products**

889. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a list of all medicines and food supplements which are currently subject to patient specific arrangements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10121/22]

**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**

890. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health his definition of patient specific arrangement; the criteria used and the way that an individual patient's needs are assessed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10122/22]

**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.

### **Eating Disorders**

891. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who reported to emergency departments in public hospitals with eating disorders in each CHO by month since 1 January 2020; the numbers of these who are admitted to hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10123/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Gorse Burning**

892. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions that he is taking to address illegal gorse fires; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10114/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Wild-fire is an easily preventable threat to our beautiful hills and bogs and the habitats and livelihoods they sustain. Everyone must play their part in protecting our landscapes and supporting our emergency services and ensuring they are not needlessly diverted by illegal fires.

There is a inherent natural risk of fire in our uplands and on bogs at this time of year, due to the condition of vegetation in these area. Upland grasses, heather and gorse are highly flammable in spring when the weather is dry. In the right conditions, any ignition, for any reason, can give rise to wildfires. Both landowners and the wider public, whether they are at work or enjoying the countryside, should be mindful of the significant risks of fire at this time of year and be aware of the damage to land and habitats caused by illegal burning and other accidental

and unintentional ignitions. The Department conducts a number of activities annually to monitor and reduce wildfire incidence and outcomes.

The burning of vegetation is controlled by the Wildlife Acts. It is an offence under Section 40 of the Wildlife Act, 1976 (amended by Section 46 of the Wildlife Act, 2000) to burn, from 1st March to 31st August in any year, any vegetation growing on any land not then cultivated. Individuals who are found to burn vegetation within that prohibited period are liable to prosecution by An Garda Síochána or by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). This Department has no role in regard to prosecutions.

The Department has issued reminders to all landowners in relation to illegal burning of agricultural lands, and any land found to have been burned illegally can be deemed ineligible across a number of area-based schemes. The Department monitors fire activity and risk throughout the main risk period between March and September, using a variety of means at our disposal, including satellite detections and ground inspections.

The Department has also undertaken a number of awareness measures aimed at reducing the level of illegal ignitions, particularly on farmland, and in ensuring that affected sectors are fully prepared for fire outbreaks where these occur. This includes the provision of Fire Danger Rating Notices to relevant sectors and Departments to ensure that the correct level of preparedness is maintained throughout the fire season. The Department also encourages the safe use of fire by land managers during the open burning season, and provides guidance for doing so.

It is important to note that wildfire ignitions occur from a variety of sources, not just agriculture, and many fires have occurred on lands with no associated agricultural activity, including lands used for turf cutting, and public lands with open access used by the public for recreation. Fires associated with illegal dumping on bogland are a particular problem. In 2021, some of the largest and most problematic fires occurred on non-agricultural land as a result of recreational land user activities and other non-agricultural sources.

The farming community has a central role to play in the control of fire in our landscapes through the management of land, and the reduction and maintenance of fire prone vegetation (such as purple moor grass, heather, and gorse/whin) as potential fuels in high fire risk areas. To this end, the Department supports a number of locally-led schemes under the EIP-AGRI measure that in turn support the implementation of fire management activities on the ground including vegetation management activities. Projects of this type are now in place in many of the main fire risk locations in Ireland, including the Blackstairs Mountains, Wicklow Mountains, McGillicuddy Reeks, Inishowen Peninsula, Connemara, and within the Hen Harrier Project.

The Hen Harrier project is a results-based project, supported by the Department, covering key habitats across a number of different counties. The project has recently developed and implemented a number of specific fire management measures including upland grazing management and support, the development of ponds in high risk areas that can provide water for aerial fire fighting operations, and the safe use of fire as a land management tool by landowners. The project also liaises directly with relevant local fire services in areas where it operates. All of the upland projects involve fire management education and awareness building activities directly with landowners through project agricultural advisors and direct inputs from local fire and rescue services and experts from my Department and Teagasc.

The Department will activate its Fire Danger Rating System in March again for the fire season ahead and this will provide advance warning ahead of high risk weather phases. I would advise Forest owners and managers to check and update their fire plans and other relevant contingencies such as insurance, firebreaks, access and water points, and private helicopter contracts etc., so as to be prepared well in advance of high fire risk phases. Rural dwellers should

also assess wildfire risks to their homes and properties and prepare accordingly. Guidance for this is available from the Office of Emergency Planning “*Be Summer Ready*” awareness campaign [www.gov.ie/summerready](http://www.gov.ie/summerready) .

There has been a very significant increase in the use of outdoor amenities and recreation sites by the public since the onset of Covid-19. This is a very welcome development, however forest visitors are reminded not to light fires or use barbeques, to behave responsibly, observe relevant local bye-laws, observe correct physical distancing practice and to park considerately so as not to impede access of emergency vehicles to incidents.

There is a very firm link in recent years between serious wildfire ignitions and illegal dumping and burning of domestic waste in many areas, and malicious burning at forest amenity sites and turf bogs open to the public. The Department asks all countryside users to be vigilant, to report any suspicious activity to An Garda Síochána, and to report any uncontrolled or unattended fires immediately to the Fire and Emergency Services via 112/999 service. We all have our part to play in protecting our countryside from uncontrolled fires.

Fire warnings can be accessed at: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/642e6-forestry/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/642e6-forestry/) and [www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/forest-fire-risk/](http://www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/forest-fire-risk/)

### **Animal Welfare**

893. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the measures being taken to address equine welfare in County Tipperary; if his attention has been drawn to continued instances of neglected and abused horses being discovered in areas such as Littleton; if his attention has been further drawn to the work being carried out by an organisation (details supplied) in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9096/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Government policy is clear and consistent - animal cruelty is totally unacceptable. My Department operates a confidential animal welfare helpline through which members of the public can report incidents of suspected animal cruelty or neglect. The specific incident was reported to the Department via this helpline and is currently under investigation by Department officials and it is being treated with the utmost seriousness.

As this is primarily a Control of Horses issue on public lands, the Department is working with Tipperary County Council and other stakeholders, to safeguard the longer term animal welfare issues at this location, using a collaborative approach.

In recognition of the important role played by the many organisations safeguarding animals throughout the country, in December 2021 I announced record funding of over €3.7 million for 98 eligible animal welfare organisations. Of this, I was pleased to award funding of €26,250 to the organisation mentioned. This exchequer funding helps support the organisation in its animal welfare work.

### **Departmental Bodies**

894. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of meetings of the Beef Market Taskforce that have been held since its establishment in 2019; the details of the meetings scheduled for 2022; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [9183/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Beef Taskforce was established on foot of the beef sector agreement of 15th September 2019. The Beef Taskforce's remit as set out in its terms of reference was to monitor the implementation of the actions arising from that agreement. The Beef Taskforce had 11 meetings in total between its initial one in December 2019 and the final one in July last year.

I published the final report of the Chair of the Beef Taskforce last November.

The report clearly sets out that the group satisfied its remit in monitoring and progressing the implementation of the actions agreed by stakeholders in the beef sector agreement of 15th September 2019.

The Taskforce has delivered on its commitments which consisted of a total of 38 actions in two strands, one for the implementation of immediate changes and the second which related to strategic structural reform.

Further details relating to the Taskforce including the aforementioned Chairman's report, minutes of each meeting and the market transparency studies that were commissioned are available on my Departments website at:

[www.gov.ie/en/collection/1a060-beef-taskforce/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1a060-beef-taskforce/)

As the Deputy may be aware, I recently announced the establishment of a Food Vision Dairy Group. I will establish a group for the beef and sheep sectors, to advance the specific sectoral actions identified in Food Vision 2030.

Preparations are currently under way to establish this new forum and further details will be announced in due course.

Ensuring there is a long-term, sustainable and viable future for our suckler and beef farmers is a key priority. This new sectoral forum will take a strategic view of supporting the development of the sector and contribute to our over arching objective of our Food Vision 2030 strategy, that Ireland will become a world leader in sustainable food systems over the next decade.

## **Animal Welfare**

895. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures that can be taken to prevent continued mistreatment of animals in circumstances in which such repeated instances have been detected; if increased prevention measures can be adopted in such areas under the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9239/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government places a positive emphasis on animal welfare and specifically commits to the continued robust enforcement of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013.

This Act provides a modern framework for regulating and applying standards in the area of animal health and welfare and replaced a number of enactments dating back over a century. The Act was passed, after a lengthy and constructive debate in both Houses of the Oireachtas and came into operation on 6th March 2014.

In line with the Programme for Government, I am committed to the continued application of

the Act which is considered fit for purpose in protecting animals from cruelty.

My Department continues to enforce the law in this important area along with An Garda Síochána, the Customs service, and authorised officers from the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In terms of repeated instances of animal welfare offences, authorised officers have the powers to issue Animal Health and Welfare Notices with conditions of compliances, which are followed up with repeat inspections, and where appropriate, animals may be seized and criminal proceedings may be taken. Prosecutions can result in fines, imprisonment and court orders limiting the numbers of animals people can keep or indeed preventing offenders from keeping animals. Compliance with these court orders is checked regularly by Department officials. My Department is currently assessing the penalties available under the Act in accordance with the commitment in the current Programme for Government.

My Department also takes a preventive approach to alleviate welfare concerns for both animals and their owners. In addition to continued and vigorous enforcement of the law, in line with the ‘One Health, One Welfare’ ethos, my Department is committed to a policy of education and awareness-building in order to prevent animal welfare issues arising. Significant animal welfare related measures have been advanced recently within the scope of our national *Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025, Working Together for Animal Welfare*. The Strategy is backed by resources and expertise within the Department and involves dialogue and cooperation with other Government Departments and agencies, with stakeholders and with civil society. I have requested that Teagasc mainstream the ‘One Health, One Welfare’ approach in to all their relevant research projects, education and training programmes.

In December 2021, I announced the allocation of over €3.7 million in grants to 98 animal welfare charities throughout the country. In line with the commitment in the Programme for Government, this marks the largest award of grant funding to animal welfare bodies ever made by my Department. In line with the ambitions of the Strategy, this funding placed emphasis on the ‘One Health, One Welfare’ approach to education and dissemination of knowledge to improve animal welfare delivered by the organisations.

### Departmental Schemes

896. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Clare under the beef data genomics programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9496/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The named person was deemed to be non-compliant with certain terms and conditions of the Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP) scheme in 2021.

The non-compliance related the stock bull requirement. For 2021, where participants used a stock bull they were required to have at least one stock bull on the holding on 30th June 2021 and the bull had to be genotyped 4 or 5 star on either the Terminal or Replacement index (on a within or across breed basis) at the time of purchase. For applicants using Artificial Insemination (AI), at least 80% of the AI used on the participating holding must be from 4 or 5 star bulls on either the Terminal or Replacement index (on a within or across breed basis). Participants using both stock bulls and AI had to comply with both requirements.

The person named used both stock bulls and AI for the 2021 scheme year. While he was compliant with the AI requirement, he did not have an eligible 4/5 star stock bull on his holding

on 30th June 2021 as the stock bulls present on the holding on that date had not been genotyped. As a result, payment did not issue.

The person named has submitted a request for a review and this is now being considered. They will be notified of the outcome in due course. If they are dissatisfied with the outcome of the review, he has a further right of appeal to the Agriculture Appeals Office.

### **Forestry Sector**

897. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter in relation to forestry policy (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9540/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As the Deputy may be aware, Project Woodland was established in February last year to ensure that the current forestry licensing backlog is addressed and that a new impetus is brought to woodland creation in Ireland. A national shared vision for the future of Ireland's trees and forests and a new Forestry Strategy are currently being developed by Working Group 2 of Project Woodland. This new Forest Strategy will underpin a new Forestry Programme for the period 2023 - 2027.

The Strategy will be based on a cross-society shared national vision for the role of trees and forests in Ireland. An extensive public consultation process on the new strategy has commenced and will shape this vision. This process will give all stakeholders, communities and citizens in general an opportunity to raise any issues that they feel need to be addressed with my Department.

A public consultation facility will be available online in the coming weeks to gather informed views from interested members of the public about the draft vision and on the forest strategy and I encourage the organisation named and others to engage in this process.

The Strategy will be based on a set of clear and implementable actions that support a sustainable forestry industry and delivers multiple benefits for our economy, environment and our communities.

In parallel with the development of the Forest Strategy an external legal and regulatory review, which will include a comparative analysis of the regulatory system in other counties is nearing completion, and I look forward to sharing the findings of this review with you soon.

A well-functioning licensing system is of course essential for achieving our afforestation targets. While I recognise that the licensing situation still requires our full attention, it is also important to acknowledge that better results were achieved in 2021, with 4,050 licences having been issued, representing an increase of 56% on 2020. A total of 502 afforestation licences issued, facilitating the planting of over 4,255ha. The recently published licensing plan for 2022 sets an ambitious overall target of 5,250 licences, with a focus on increasing the number of afforestation licences.

In order to achieve the afforestation targets set out in the Climate Action Plan, it is essential to address the broader issue of increasing the level of interest in planting. I am particularly concerned about the low conversion rate to planting. We are currently writing to applicants with unused licences to remind them that their licence is still valid and to encourage them to consider using them before their approval lapses. It is important that positive messages around planting are communicated and this is the responsibility of all in the sector, especially those in direct contact with farmers and landowners.

The introduction of an amendment to the Forestry Act 2014 to facilitate small scale tree planting without the need for a licence may appeal to certain landowners and will widen the options available for planting.

I would also like to note that the national land use review which commenced earlier this year will provide us with information on the optimal land use options and its findings will inform all relevant land use policies.

I am fully committed to the delivery of a well-functioning licensing system which will underpin a new vision for a multi-functional sustainable forestry model focused on our mutual economic, environmental and recreational objectives.

### **Departmental Advertising**

898. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount that his Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9568/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department paid the named company €2,700 excluding VAT.

### **Forestry Sector**

899. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress being made on the afforestation of surplus lands owned by public bodies, Government Departments and local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9590/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In August 2020, the Creation of Woodlands on Public Land Scheme (CWPL) was launched. The purpose of the Scheme is to encourage Public Bodies to establish new native woodlands on suitable bare land. This aim is consistent with the Programme for Government, which sought to “embark on an ambitious programme of afforestation on state-owned lands”.

Native woodlands are an important part of Ireland’s natural, historical, and cultural heritage, and are unique in terms of their biodiversity. They are home to specialised woodland animals, birds, insects, and plants, including red squirrel, pine marten, great spotted woodpecker, narrow-leaved helleborine and wood millet, to name but a few.

The Scheme aims to conserve nature by promoting the establishment of permanent non-commercial native woodlands on public land, which can deliver a range of benefits.

The Climate Action Regional Office (CARO) in the Atlantic Seaboard South Region, in partnership with my Department, have carried out a land bank analysis targeted at 300 public bodies in late 2020. This analysis showed that the majority of public bodies are landowners and nearly half of the public bodies that responded to the survey reported that they have land available that might be suitable for the creation of new native woodlands. Following this analysis, CARO have developed a FAQ Guidance document, targeted at Local Authorities in particular, with additional guidance for public bodies in relation to entering and implementing this Scheme. The Guidance document can be downloaded from the CARO website.

To date there have been 22 applications from public bodies across 12 counties, for 100 ha of forestry. Seven have been approved and three have commenced planting. Just this week,

I launched a wonderful site in Co. Sligo which will become a 105 acre woodland with public amenities. This is on land owned by the HSE and financed by my Department under this scheme.

General information on the Creation of Woodland on Public Lands Scheme, including a breakdown of Grants available, can be found at: [www.gov.ie/en/service/4b0e6-creation-of-woodland-on-public-lands-scheme/](http://www.gov.ie/en/service/4b0e6-creation-of-woodland-on-public-lands-scheme/)

## **EU Directives**

900. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason Ireland has adopted the approach set out by EU Directive 2019/633 in respect of business size of targeting relationships between suppliers whose annual turnover is lower than a given threshold and buyers whose annual turnover is higher than the same threshold while other member states varied the scope; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9795/22]

901. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if EU Directive 2019/633 is being used as the basis to underpin the establishment of a food ombudsman as part of the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9796/22]

902. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when legislation will be brought before Dáil Éireann for the establishment of a food ombudsman; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9797/22]

903. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if some or all of the submissions have been adopted in relation to the establishment of the office of a national food ombudsman, regulator or equivalent and necessary legislation, in respect of the recent public consultation process on the establishment of the office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9798/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 900, 901, 902 and 903 together.

The Government is committed to ensuring fairness, equity, and transparency in the food chain. The Deputy will be aware that the Programme for Government includes a commitment for a new office of National Food Ombudsman to enforce the EU Directive No. 2019/633 on Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) and to have a role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland. The establishment of the new Office requires primary legislation which my Department is progressing at present.

In regard to provisions on turnover thresholds in the Directive, one of the objectives of the Directive is to protect smaller suppliers against unfair trading practices by larger buyers. While the Directive provides that Member States may extend those provisions, for example in relation to the turnover thresholds, any such changes in Ireland require primary legislation.

The UTP Directive was required to be transposed by 1 May 2021. Therefore, in April 2021, I transposed the Directive into Irish law by way of statutory instrument (SI 198 of 2021). Consequently the Directive was transposed as it stands, without changing the Directive provisions. Ireland was one of only seven Member States to transpose the Directive ahead of the deadline. At the same time, I established a UTP Enforcement Authority in my Department, as an interim measure, pending the finalisation of the primary legislation.

Introducing powers to extend the provisions of the Directive is a matter that is being given consideration in the preparation of primary legislation being prepared for the establishment of the new Office.

In regard to the submissions that were received through the recent public consultation process on the establishment of the new Office, as part of the work to develop the principles and policies underlining the primary legislation all submissions received are being given due consideration.

In regard to the timing of the completion of the primary legislation, preparations for the General Scheme of the Bill for the primary legislation are well advanced, and I hope to bring a Memorandum to Government on this shortly.

I am confident that the new Office will bring increased transparency to the agri-food sector and, along with the enforcement of the UTP Directive, that the increased availability of market information will strengthen the position of primary producers and other suppliers in the agricultural and food supply chain.

*Question No. 901 answered with Question No. 900.*

*Question No. 902 answered with Question No. 900.*

*Question No. 903 answered with Question No. 900.*

### **Regulatory Bodies**

904. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will outline all meetings held between his Department and the Sea Fisheries Protection Agency in 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022, including the dates, attendees and purpose of each meeting in tabular form. [9811/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As part of the ongoing and necessary working relationships, officials at all levels of my Department discuss a range of matters on a regular and routine basis with officials from the three marine agencies; Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA), Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) and the Marine Institute (MI) in relation to a variety of ongoing issues.

Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction, Act 2006, the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) is independent in the exercise of its functions. I am precluded from getting involved in any operational control matters. I may give such general policy direction in writing to the Authority in relation to its functions, which must be laid before each House of the Oireachtas. However, such directions may not be construed as enabling a Minister to exercise any power or control in relation to any individual case or groups of cases with which the Authority is or may be concerned or in relation to the performance in particular circumstances by the Authority of a function assigned to it. Under the Act, the Authority advises me in relation to policy on effective implementation of sea fisheries law and food safety law and provides assistance and information to me in relation to the remit of the Authority.

I am responsible as Minister for corporate governance oversight of the SFPA in accordance with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, which involves regular meetings from a corporate governance perspective. A list of high level Corporate Governance Oversight meetings which took place between my Department and the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority from 2020-22 is attached. In accordance with

the responsibilities set down in the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, my Department interacts regularly with the SFPA, including meeting the Authority from time to time on a range of issues and in particular over the period specified in relation to the implementation of the EU /UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement and Ireland's response to the EU Commission's Decision in July 2019 to carry out an Administrative Inquiry under Article 102(2) of the EU Control Regulation 1224/2009.

Year	Meeting Title	Date	Purpose
2020	Meeting 1/20 High Level Corporate Governance (Chaired by Assistant Secretary General)	14/02/2020	Oversight of compliance by SFPA with provisions of Code of Practice (COP) for Corporate Governance of State Bodies 2016.
	Meeting 2/20 High Level Corporate Governance (Chaired by Assistant Secretary General)	02/06/2020	As above.
	Meeting 3/20 High Level Corporate Governance (Chaired by Assistant Secretary General)	11/11/2020	As above.
	Separate Meeting(s) High Level Corporate Governance (attended by Secretary General) High Level Corporate Governance (chaired by Minister)	06/04/2020 30/07/2020	As above As above
2021	Meeting 1 High Level Corporate Governance (Chaired by Assistant Secretary General)	16/03/2021	As above
	Meeting 2/21 High Level Corporate Governance (Chaired by Assistant Secretary General)	15/07/2021	As above
	Meeting 3/21 High Level Corporate Governance (Chaired by Assistant Secretary General)	17/11/2021	As above
	Separate High Level Corporate Governance Meeting(s)* Attended by Minister ** Attended by Minister and Secretary General	17/02/2021* 22/04/2021**	As above As above
2022	Meeting 1/22 High Level Corporate Governance (Chaired by Assistant Secretary General)	Scheduled for 10/3/2022	As above

Year	Meeting Title	Date	Purpose
	Separate Meeting(s) High Level Corporate Governance Meeting(s) with Minister & Sec Gen	tba	

### Regulatory Bodies

905. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide the full organisational structure of the Sea Fisheries Protection Agency; the number of staff by grade; and if the agency has enough staff and executives to fulfil its role. [9812/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) is by statute independent in the exercise of its functions and as Minister I have responsibility for policy formation, resource allocation and corporate governance oversight only.

The request for an organogram providing detail of SFPAs organisational structure and the total staffing by grade are matters for direct response by SFPA and accordingly I have referred these questions for direct response by the SFPA to the Deputy.

SFPA staffing numbers have increased significantly over recent years, from 134 in Quarter 4 of 2019 to 166 today (Quarter 1 2022). The significant increase in SFPA staffing over recent years has been approved to address the additional functions that arose as a result of (i) BREXIT (including export and import certification) and (ii) the serious deficiencies in the Irish fisheries control system which are being pursued under the EU Commission Administrative Inquiry. Significant additional resources have been provided to SFPA in recent years with the SFPA budget allocation for staffing increasing from €12.41m in 2020 to €14.87m in 2022.

As Minister, I am responsible for making appointments to the 3 person SFPA Executive Management Authority. I appointed a new Executive Chairperson/Member to the SFPA Authority on 14 January 2022. There are currently 2 vacancies on the Authority which are due to be advertised shortly by the Public Appointments Service (PAS).

### Agriculture Schemes

906. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a GLAS payment will issue to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9814/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The person named was approved to GLAS 1 with a contract commencement date of 1st October 2015.

Processing of the 2021 Advance Payment for the person named are at an advanced stage and I expect the payment in this case to be finalised shortly.

GLAS payments are continuing on a weekly basis as applications pass all validation checks and are approved for payment.

### Public Services Provision

907. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9826/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has not received an award from the publication concerned.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

908. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider revising the upper age limit for access to various Departmental schemes that occurs when a young farmer obtains a green certificate (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9860/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The upper age limit of 40 for an eligible young farmer under CAP support schemes currently administered by my Department is set down in the EU Regulations governing the operation of the schemes and applies to all Member States. EU Regulation 2021/2115, establishing rules on support for Strategic Plans by Member States under the next CAP, allows Member States to apply an upper age limit set between 35 and 40 years in determining the age for an eligible young farmer. Ireland has opted to set the young farmer age limit at the maximum allowable level of 40 years under the next CAP.

### **Departmental Communications**

909. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he uses an application on his official Government phone; if so, if he has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application on his phone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9953/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I do have the application WhatsApp on my phone, however, I do not use the disappearing messages function.

### **Forestry Sector**

910. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of afforestation applications awaiting a decision by his Department; the number of those applications which are for GPC3 planting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9983/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Department has published a Licensing Plan for 2022. It includes a commitment to double the number of licences issued from 502 for over 4,200 hectares in 2021 to 1,040 licences in 2022.

There are currently 846 afforestation applications on hand awaiting decision. Of these, 466 include at least one plot to plant GPC3. A forestry licence can, of course, have more than one GPC included in the application.

## Departmental Communications

911. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide a copy of all briefing material provided related to the matters covered by SI. 318.2020 including correspondence and communications with the then acting Minister, special advisers and officials in August 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10005/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** It is considered that the request from the Deputy for the material referred to can most appropriately be dealt with under the Freedom of Information Act 2014.

I would therefore suggest that the Deputy submit a formal FOI request to my Department in the standard manner by emailing [foi@agriculture.gov.ie](mailto:foi@agriculture.gov.ie) with full details of his request and material sought. Full consideration will then be given to any request submitted in that context.

## EU Funding

912. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if funding was withheld from Ireland by the European Union until SI. No. 318/2020 was signed; if so, if he will clarify the level of funding that was withheld; if the funding has been released; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10006/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department's €240 million European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme 2014-20 is the framework programme for the sustainable development of our seafood sector. The Programme is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union.

The EMFF Regulation (508/2014) and Common Provisions Regulation (1303/2013) specify the regulatory framework for Member State EMFF Programmes and for EU co-funding of those Programmes. These include a number of ex-ante conditionalities that were required to be satisfied before the Commission would adopt the relevant Programme. At the time of the adoption of Ireland's EMFF Programme in December 2015, Ireland was not in compliance with one ex-ante conditionality relating to the administrative capacity to apply the point system for serious infringements, as provided for in Article 92 of the EU Control Regulation (1224/2009).

Adoption of Ireland's Programme by the Commission in December 2015 was conditional on Ireland putting in place the necessary legal and administrative systems to implement the points system within an agreed timeframe, namely 30 June 2016. As the necessary legislation was not enacted within this timeframe, the Commission subsequently adopted an Implementing Decision on 12 June 2018 to suspend interim payments to Ireland under the Programme in respect of Ireland's investment in control and enforcement of the Common Fisheries Policy. As investment in control and enforcement has progressed over the course of the Programme, Ireland has lodged related interim payment claims worth €24.4 million with the Commission and payment of these funds has duly been suspended by the Commission in accordance with its 2018 Implementing Decision. A further claim due to be lodged shortly may increase this figure to close to €30 million. Investment remains ongoing and thus the EU funds suspended will ultimately reach the full EMFF allocation to Ireland for control and enforcement of €37.2 million, unless the non-compliance is resolved. Once Ireland has enacted the necessary legislation and put in place the related administrative procedures and resources, the Commission is then required to lift the suspension of payments.

The European Union (Common Fisheries Policy)(Point System) Regulations (SI No

318/2020) were signed into law in August 2020. These Regulations adopt the requirements of the governing EU Regulations and establish a points system for sea fishing boat licence holders when a serious infringement of the rules of the common fisheries policy is detected within the exclusive fishery limits of the State or for an Irish vessel wherever it may be. These Regulations partly address the reasons for the suspension. Separately, the Sea Fisheries (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021, currently before the Oireachtas, also adopts the requirements of the governing EU regulations and in that regard provides for a system of registration and assignment of points to masters of sea fishing boats who are Irish citizens. The enactment of this Bill and its subsequent administrative implementation will facilitate this issue being fully and finally resolved and the related funds released to Ireland.

### **Fishing Industry**

913. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if other European Union countries operate a penalty regime on owners, licensees and masters and skip-pers of fishing vessels similar to that included in SI. No. 318/2020; if a comparative analysis was carried out; if so, if he will provide details of same; if not, if he will provide the reasons therefor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10007/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The European Union (Common Fisheries Policy) (Point System) Regulations 2020 - SI No 318/2020 adopts the requirements of Article 92 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1224/2009 of 20 November 2009 and Title VII of Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 404/2011.

In accordance with the EU Regulations, this instrument establishes a point system, which will apply to the licence holder of a sea fishing boat when a serious infringement of the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy is detected within the exclusive fishery limits of the State or for an Irish vessel wherever it may be.

The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority is determined as the competent authority for the establishment of the system and the assignment of points. The Licensing Authority is the competent authority for the recording of points assigned to the licence of an Irish registered fishing vessel and the transfer of those points.

SI No 318/2020 provides for the establishment of a Determination Panel comprised of three independent legal professionals nominated by the Attorney General to determine if, on the balance of probabilities, a serious infringement occurred. The instrument also establishes an independent appeals officer to review the decision of the Determination Panel at the request of the licence holder.

The governing EU regulations mentioned above are directly applicable in all Member States, who are obliged to implement the relevant requirements of same insofar as the points system for licence holders is concerned.

A number of key features of the points system, including the list of serious infringements, the number of points applicable to each and the thresholds for suspension and disqualification, are set out in the EU Regulations. Accordingly, the same fundamental elements of the points system such as these must feature in the systems adopted by Member States across the EU. Particular differences in the points systems of different Member States that may arise from the practical arrangements put in place to implement the points system and these arrangements may arise from the specific type and nature of the legal systems of those Member States.

The EU Commission commissioned a report, published in January 2021, that provides an

in-depth analysis of the national systems sanctioning the infringements of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and in particular of the sanctions applied by Member States for infringements detected between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2019, including insofar as the EU points systems are concerned. This report is available here:

Study on the sanctioning systems of Member States for infringements to the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)

In addition, a study prepared for the EU Parliament's PECH Committee was published in July 2020 entitled "Implementation of the current EU Fisheries control system by Member States (2014-2019)" which also considered *inter alia* the EU points systems. This study is available here:

Implementation of the current EU fisheries control system by Member States (2014-19) (europa.eu)

### Common Fisheries Policy

914. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of penalty points that have been issued following prosecution by the chosen competent control agencies in other European Union member states against the fishing licenses attached to boats within their fishing fleets under the current Common Fisheries Policy; if he will provide a breakdown of the figures of legal systems similar to Ireland and those with civil law systems; if the figures are not available to him in his Department, if he has sought those figures from other member states; if not, if he intends to do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10008/22]

915. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of skippers and or captains and or ships masters that have been allocated administrative sanctions by means of penalty points following prosecution by the chosen competent control agencies in other member states of the European Union; if he will provide a breakdown of the figures of legal systems similar to Ireland and those with civil law systems; if the figures are not available to him in his Department, if he has sought those figures from other member states; if not, if he intends to do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10009/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 914 and 915 together.

The monitoring and control of fishing vessels within Ireland's exclusive fisheries zone are matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, all operational matters of this nature are exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority and the Naval Service. I am expressly precluded from getting involved in operational matters such as those referred to by the Deputy.

The SFPA has advised that no Irish national masters resident in Ireland have been assigned points by it under the administrative points system provided for under Council Regulation (EC) 1224/2009 following prosecution by other Member States.

The EU Commission is the competent authority to verify the control operations carried out by the competent authorities of Member States. In relation to the application of sanctioning systems across Member States, including the application of a points system for licence holders and masters, the EU Commission published a report in January 2021 that provided an in-depth analysis of the national systems sanctioning the infringements of the Common Fisheries Policy

(CFP) and, in particular, of the sanctions applied by Member States for infringements detected between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2019, including insofar as the EU points systems are concerned. This report is available here:

Study on the sanctioning systems of Member States for infringements to the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)

In addition, a study prepared for the EU Parliament's PECH Committee was published in July 2020 entitled "Implementation of the current EU Fisheries control system by Member States (2014-2019)" which also considered *inter alia* the EU points systems. This study is available here:

Implementation of the current EU fisheries control system by Member States (2014-19) (europa.eu)

*Question No. 915 answered with Question No. 914.*

### **Departmental Policies**

916. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a herd number can issue to an applicant in circumstances in which a will has not yet been probated or any living relatives have been located; if this is not possible, the mechanism that may be available to the applicant to progress an application (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10020/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** A herd number is an administrative device issued by my Department for the purposes of disease control. A herd number does not imply ownership of lands, ownership of any animals kept or tested under that herd number or entitlement to payments under any schemes operated by my Department.

There are two roles associated with a herd number - herd owner and keeper.

If a keeper, who is in the role of 'herdowner', dies, then the role of herdowner can only be assigned to another person, when all legal documentation, i.e., certified copies of the will and grant of probate, have been provided to my Department.

If probate is unavailable, a solicitor's letter, confirming same must accompany the will and a certified copy of probate must be forwarded to my Department when later granted.

Therefore, it is open to the personal representatives of a deceased herdowner, to register an interest in the herd by writing to my Department through their solicitor confirming that they are acting as representatives of the deceased and that probate or letters of administration are being taken out in favour of the applicant and indemnifying my Department against any damages or claims arising from the assignment of the herd number to their client.

If there are animals on a holding and the identity of the herdowner or keeper cannot reasonably be ascertained, or the herdowner or keeper is not suitable, a natural person may be nominated by the personal representatives to act as keeper.

Alternatively, a person may apply for new herd number. The applicant must submit evidence of entitlement to use the lands on which the herd number is being applied for, such as, original or certified copies of land registry documents, deed of transfer or a written lease agreement.

## Horse Racing Industry

917. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has explored the potential development of the harness racing sector as outlined in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10061/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Irish Harness Racing Association (IHRA) is a representative body for harness racing in Ireland.

From 2016 to date grants totaling some €175,000 have been paid to the IHRA under the Equine Infrastructure Scheme operated by my Department. Other supports have also been provided my Department in relation to the production of a strategic plan and an education programme aimed at road racing sulky participants.

My Department has received a number of funding submissions from the IHRA which have been reviewed by my officials and myself. In that context, I recently met with representatives of the IHRA and will provide a response to the IHRA in relation to the issues raised in the near future.

## Departmental Staff

918. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of full-time forestry inspectors and full-time ecologists recruited by his Department in 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022, in tabular form. [10076/22]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The number of full time, permanent Forestry Inspectors and ecologists that were recruited by the Department for forestry licensing since 2020 are set out below. Note: not all work directly on forestry licencing as my Department has a range of forestry functions.

	2020	2021	2022
Forestry Inspectors	6	3	0
Ecologists	6	1	0

In addition, the Department uses temporary forestry inspectors and contract ecologists for forestry licensing. We currently have 27 full-time equivalent ecologists working on forestry in the Department.

We issued 4,050 licences in 2021, an increase of 56% on 2020. I have allocated additional resources to deal with the backlog, and this increase in output is reflective of the additional resources we have put in place. We are keeping resource requirements under continuous review and further ecologists and forestry inspectors are being recruited. Alongside this, we have introduced new processes which have led to more efficient processing.

## Domestic Violence

919. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 4 of 14 October 2021, if Carlow County Development Partnership has commissioned a report into the ongoing need for a domestic violence refuge in Carlow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9537/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy**

**Joe O'Brien):** The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, or SICAP, is our country's primary social inclusion intervention. SICAP aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality. It does this through Programme Implementers, agencies and companies, who work with the most disadvantaged and the hardest to reach in communities.

Carlow County Development Partnership (CCDP) implements SICAP in County Carlow. Disadvantaged Women and Lone Parents are key target groups under the programme. I understand that, as part of their annual plan for 2022, CCDP are currently developing the brief for the commissioning of a report on the need for a domestic violence refuge in Carlow.

### **Departmental Advertising**

920. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount that her Department has paid for advertising, features and so on in a magazine (details supplied). [9581/22]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department does not subscribe to the publication referred to by the Deputy and it is not distributed to staff. No payments relating to advertisements or other matters have been made by my Department to the company concerned.

### **Rural Schemes**

921. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the up-to-date position regarding the drawdown of funding from her Department granted under The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the town and village renewal scheme in respect of Cahersiveen, County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9626/22]

922. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the up-to-date position regarding the drawdown of funding from her Department granted under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the town and village renewal scheme in respect of Killorglin, County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9627/22]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 921 and 922 together.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) provides funding for the development and construction of capital projects in towns and villages and rural areas across Ireland. The Fund has, to date, allocated funding of €277 million for 191 projects across the country worth a total of €375 million.

Calls for applications to the RRDF are sought under two categories – Category 1 and Category 2. Category 1 relates to large scale ambitious capital projects with all necessary planning and other consents in place and which are ready to proceed. Category 2 provides smaller grant funding to enable the development of project proposals suitable for future calls for Category 1 applications.

In terms of the towns referred to by the Deputy, the Cahersiveen Town Centre Regeneration project led by Kerry County Council was allocated funding of €2,056,380 under the second call for Category 2 applications in 2020. €56,485 of this funding has been drawn down to date. The Killorglin Town Centre SMART Rural Regeneration project, also led by Kerry County Council, was allocated funding of €961,800 under the third call for Category 2 applications in January

2022. No funding has been drawn down to date in respect of this project.

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS) aims to assist with the rejuvenation of rural towns and villages throughout Ireland, making them more attractive places to live, work, and visit.

Details of TVRS projects funded in Killorglin and Cahersiveen and drawdowns of funding are set out in the table below.

Town/Village	Scheme	Project Description	Funding Awarded	Amount draw-down	Final drawdown date
Cahersiveen	TVRS 2017	The provision of IT equipment for a higher education programme and market research into establishing a higher education satellite campus.	€80,000	€80,000	15/07/2019
Killorglin	TVRS 2017	To establish “The Adventure Gateway” to celebrate Mid-Kerry as a world class outdoor adventure destination, with Killorglin, its main urban centre, as its gateway.	€64,480	€64,480	15/10/2018
Killorglin	TVRS 2018	Streetscape enhancement; study of the usage of vacant properties; and public realm improvements.	€64,000	€55,629	31/05/2021
Killorglin	TVRS 2020 (Accelerated Measure)	Upgrade of car park and surrounding area at Killorglin Community Sports Centre.	€25,000	€23,800	21/05/2021 (Notification of completion)

*Question No. 922 answered with Question No. 921.*

### Ferry Services

923. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will ensure that a ferry service is provided for Dursey Island as a replacement for the cable car service which is due to stop for maintenance work later in 2022. [9737/22]

924. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will engage with Cork County Council and local stakeholders on the Beara Peninsula concerning the announced closure of the Dursey Island cable car service for maintenance work later in 2022. [9738/22]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 923 and 924 together.

My Department fully understands the importance of the Dursey Island cable car service for island residents, the local farming community, and the impact the withdrawal of the service will have on tourism in the region.

It is important to note, however, that Cork County Council are wholly responsible for the provision of the cable car service and their recent decision to withdraw it was taken without any prior consultation with my Department.

When maintaining its infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and in this case the cable car, the council are responsible for providing alternative routes to minimise any access disruptions.

Nonetheless, I am very mindful of the concerns of local stakeholders and I can assure the Deputy that my Department will continue to engage with Cork County Council and the Island representative groups to try and seek a resolution to this issue.

*Question No. 924 answered with Question No. 923.*

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

925. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the newly established Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has plans to consider the efficient use of the infrastructure and assets based in the Knock metropolitan area network specifically and the possibility of connecting more customers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9803/22]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce was re-established on 15 December 2021 with a meeting co-chaired by myself and Minister of State Ossian Smyth TD, involving participation from all key State stakeholders, including ComReg and the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland.

At the first meeting, Minister of State Smyth and I to set out our priorities for the coming period, which include improving mobile phone coverage and connectivity in rural areas, examining issues around planning permissions and licencing for, and sharing of, telecoms infrastructure, the use of public assets for telecoms purposes and improving the quality and availability of information for consumers of telecoms services and products.

The work of the Taskforce will include discussions on a number of issues that are already being examined at local authority level, such as maximising the efficiency of access to and occupancy of infrastructure to allow for more connections, reduced deployment timelines and costs and greater competition between providers. Both Minister of State Smyth and I are particularly keen to see existing assets and infrastructure leveraged to achieve this, not least in rural and isolated areas.

On foot of the initial meeting in December, a series of bilateral discussions have occurred with both state bodies and with representatives of the telecommunications industry. These bilateral meetings, led by senior officials from the two departments, have raised and explored a number of important issues that will be considered by Minister of State Smyth and I in the context of formulating the next work programme of the Taskforce.

It is my intention that the Taskforce will meet again shortly to agree the specific actions which will make up its work plan.

### **Public Services Provision**

926. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if

her Department has won any award from a publication (details supplied); if so, when this award was won; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9839/22]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that my Department has not won any award from the Public Sector Magazine publication.

### Library Services

927. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she plans to provide a library in Ratoath, County Meath; and if she will provide funding should a site be identified. [9913/22]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The delivery of public library services, including the provision of library premises, is a matter for each local authority in accordance with the Local Government Act, 2001. Accordingly, the delivery of library services in Ratoath is primarily a matter for Meath County Council.

My Department funds a Libraries Capital Programme 2016 – 2022, which is currently fully committed. However, Meath County Council may wish to explore other funding sources such as the

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF), which is administered by my Department, or the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), which is administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Meath County Council is required to consult with my department and the Local Government Management Agency prior to the development of plans for a new public library in Ratoath. They will then be requested to submit a proposal to my department for technical assessment to ensure that the project complies with the ‘Public Library National Standards and Benchmarks’ which guides the development of the public library service.

### Departmental Communications

928. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she uses an application on her official Government phone; if so, if she has the disappearing messages setting activated on the application on her phone; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9966/22]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that I have WhatsApp on my official phone. I use the application on occasion, usually for transmitting videos for social media use in relation to my Department’s work.

I do not have the disappearing messages function activated.

### Community Development Projects

929. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the new capital plan for the upgrade of community centres as referenced in the National Development Plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10052/22]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** A new capital fund for the upgrade of community centres was referenced in the National Development Plan. Indicative funding of €5m has been secured for this under Budget 2022. It is envisaged that the capital fund will support the upgrade and refurbishment of existing community buildings in urban and rural areas.

The fund will assist with projects such as:

- Energy retrofitting - projects that reduce an organisation's carbon footprint.
- Works to address safety concerns, including as a result of fire safety audits.
- Works to improve disability access.
- Works to improve communal facilities such as kitchen and toilet facilities.

The details of this capital scheme are currently being developed within my Department. It will be launched in Q1 2022, with further details being announced in due course.