

Written Answers.

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

Questions Nos. 1 to 25, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 26 to 34, inclusive, resubmitted.

Fossil Fuel Subsidies

35. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Taoiseach the amount and value of fossil fuel subsidies paid by the State in 2020 and 2021; the proportion of that expenditure that applies to the exemption of jet kerosene used for commercial flights from excise duty; and the proportion resulting from other subsidies. [9450/22]

Awaiting reply from the Department.

Questions Nos. 36 to 38, inclusive, resubmitted.

Digital Ireland Framework

39. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount budgeted for the Digital Ireland Framework; if he will review the framework on an annual basis; and if he will open a public and or stakeholder consultation on the framework. [12020/22]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In February the Government launched the new National Digital Strategy called “Harnessing Digital - The Digital Ireland Framework”. The Strategy sets out a high-level framework to support our ambition for Ireland to be a digital leader, at the heart of European and global digital developments.

Ireland’s digital ambition is aligned with EU priorities, under the EU’s Digital Decade, and our national priorities, as reflected in the 2021 Economic Recovery Plan and Ireland’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which had digitalisation and decarbonisation at its core with investments to a total value of €291 million.

The National Digital Strategy draws together the substantial amount of digital work progressing across Government, to ensure a renewed coherent and joined up approach to Ireland’s digital offering. As such, it does not have a specific amount of funding allocated for its implementation. However, it does include different initiatives that have funding allocated through either the NRRP or Budget 2022. Within my Department’s remit, €85 million is allocated through to 2026 for the Digital Transition Fund which will drive the adoption of digital technologies

across enterprise. There are other commitments where the funding required will be agreed.

Implementation of the Strategy will be overseen by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment, supported by the Digital Issues Senior Officials Group. They will review progress annually.

To inform its development, a Stakeholder Roundtable discussion was held on 9th November 2021. The National Digital Strategy also relied on the public consultation process originally carried out in 2018/2019. This consultation invited members of the public and interested stakeholders to make submissions that would inform the scope and delivery of the new strategy and the completed document takes into account the views expressed by stakeholders during that consultation process.

The Government will shortly establish the new Enterprise Digital Advisory Forum, which will include expert stakeholders to support the implementation of the National Digital Strategy as well as advising on the digital transformation of enterprise. The Digital Transition Fund will also be reviewed after the first pilot year to take into account the feedback of enterprise.

EU Directives

40. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the review on the transposition by primary legislation of EU Directive 2019/1152 on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions will be completed following the recent public consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12037/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English) (Deputy Damien English): Work is on track to transpose the Directive by the deadline of 1 August 2022. Officials in my Department are currently examining and considering the necessary amendments so that proposals can be brought to Cabinet for approval to draft legislation as soon as possible.

A public consultation on EU Directive 2019/1152 on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions was published by the Department on 17 September 2021, seeking views on issues including probationary periods at the beginning of a job; the right to predictable working hours; the right to redress; and the right to protection against adverse treatment.

The consultation process ran for five weeks until 25 October 2021. Engagement with the process was limited and a total of eleven submissions were received from a range of stakeholders including one representative trade union, two employer representative bodies, one individual employer and seven employees. These submissions have been reviewed.

My Department will in the next few weeks publish a summary of the responses received to the questions asked in the public consultation.

Data Centres

41. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if officials in his Department will engage with a person (details supplied) regarding setting up a data centre strategy for Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12166/22]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varad-

kar): My Department is aiming to complete the review of the ‘Government Statement on the Role of Data Centres in Ireland’s Enterprise Strategy’ in the first half of 2022, in line with the commitment made in Climate Action Plan 2021. The Statement was first published in 2018.

My Department has begun engagement with key stakeholders in this regard, and will continue to work closely with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, EirGrid, the CRU, IDA Ireland and others.

I will ask my officials to contact the person identified, as requested by the Deputy.

Environmental Policy

42. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he plans to formulate planning guidelines in relation to battery storage units (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11866/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Action Plan 2021 recognises the important role of energy storage, including battery storage, in facilitating the transition to higher levels of renewable energy on the system. The Department for the Environment, Climate and Communications has committed to developing a storage policy that supports the 2030 CAP targets with a decision to be published early next year. In combination, the CRU will be reviewing the regulatory treatment of storage, including licensing, charging and market incentives, which is to be completed by the end of 2023.

EirGrid has reported that a number of battery projects have been contracted via two mechanisms: SEM Capacity Auctions and DS3 Systems Services. These routes offer different but essential services to the power system on the island of Ireland.

Planning policy and related guidelines are a matter for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) in the first instance and not one in which I have any direct function. As such, it would ultimately be a matter for the Minister of that Department to bring battery storage guidelines forward, in consultation with my Department, in the event they are required. To date, there have been no discussions between DECC and the DHLGH on this subject and any decision to engage in such dialogue would arise following a determination of the need for such guidelines.

North-South Interconnector

43. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; if a response will issue to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11815/22]

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.

Government does not have any role in the delivery of electricity infrastructure on the ground. This is consistent with the 2012 Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of

Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure which states: ‘The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies’. The question relates to operational matters in which I have no role.

National Broadband Plan

44. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of apprentices that have been taken for the National Broadband Plan in each of the years 2019, 2020, 2021 and to date in 2022. [11898/22]

Awaiting reply from the Department.

Energy Policy

45. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the eligibility criteria for the energy credit by those paying a flat rate electricity fee in caravan parks. [11900/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The aim of the Electricity Costs (Domestic Electricity Accounts) Emergency Measures Bill 2022 is to establish a scheme to make a once off payment, in 2022, of an Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Payment to each domestic electricity account, having regard to the exceptional rise in energy prices. This exceptional measure uses the single eligibility criterion of a meter point registration number, to ensure payments to each domestic electricity account as early as possible in 2022. The payment will be applied to the domestic electricity account rather than an individual. While the majority of tenants will hold their own domestic electricity accounts, and therefore receive the payments directly, others would have tenancy agreements where tenants pay their actual share of each bill and, in those cases, will benefit from the payment because the amount of the bill will be reduced by the amount of the payment. A small proportion would have other arrangements in place whereby electricity costs are part of the rental cost. With the support of the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, my Department is working closely with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) on a public information campaign to ensure that all tenants are aware of the scheme. Disputes relating to tenancies including any terms relating to electricity payments can be referred to the RTB for dispute resolution.

Electricity Grid

46. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if qualification for the energy credit requires the possession of a meter point reference number. [11901/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The aim of the Electricity Costs (Domestic Electricity Accounts) Emergency Measures Bill 2022 is to establish a scheme to make a once off payment, in 2022, to each domestic electricity account, having regard to 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). This is an exceptional measure which uses the single eligibility criterion of a meter point registration number (MPRN), to ensure payments are credited to each domestic electricity account as early

as possible in 2022. The payment will be applied to the domestic electricity account rather than an individual. The scheme will also include pre-pay customers. People will not need to apply for the payment. With the support of the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, my Department is working closely with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) on a public information campaign to ensure that all tenants are aware of the scheme. Disputes relating to tenancies including any terms relating to electricity payments can be referred to the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) for dispute resolution. 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/.

Broadband Infrastructure

47. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 151 of 22 February 2022, the operators providing wireless and broadband services in the general area of an airport (details supplied). [11930/22]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I can only refer the Deputy back to the PQ reply of 22nd February, 2022. The identity of the 3 telecommunications operators connected to the Metropolitan Area Network (MAN) network at Knock Airport is a commercial matter for enet who manage the MANs on behalf of the state and for the individual operators.

Environmental Schemes

48. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the new retrofitting grants for homeowners will become available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11938/22]

49. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the first of the proposed one-stop-shops will open to advise householders in relation to retrofitting and insulation; the locations of same; the persons or bodies that will operate them; the existing locations; if premises need to be leased or purchased to facilitate these information outlets for consumers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11939/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 48 and 49 together. The recently launched National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme introduces a new, highly customer centric, way to undertake home upgrades. SEAI registered One-Stop-Shops will provide an end-to-end service for homeowners. This includes surveying; designing the upgrades; managing the grant process; helping with access to finance; engaging contractors; and quality assurance. The Scheme offers unprecedented grant levels, increased from around 30% to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump. It is expected that the One-Stop-Shops will be distributed across Ireland, with a considerable number offering services nationwide through their network of contractors throughout the country. Other One-Stop-Shops will likely work within geographic regions. This will ensure that every home can benefit from the One-Stop-Shop service on offer. As part of the new Scheme, a new system is being established by the SEAI which will streamline and automate the grant application process. Following Government approval, the SEAI registration portal for companies to apply to be a One-Stop-Shop is now open. A number of One-Stop-Shops have already applied and it is expected that following the necessary process the first will be registered shortly. Homeowners will then be able to make applications for upgrades

under the new Scheme.

Question No. 49 answered with Question No. 48.

Renewable Energy Generation

50. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he plans to introduce the long overdue scheme to pay persons for the excess energy generated by solar panels fitted in their homes which is feeding into the grid; if payment will be backdated to July 2021; the rate of payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11976/22]

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.

I signed the Regulations that transpose Articles 21 and 22 of the recast Renewable Energy Directive on the 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.

Air Quality

51. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the proposed smoky coal ban will be in place from 1 September 2022; if so, when the regulations will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11983/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I remain committed to introducing new regulations on the use of solid fuels for domestic heating in Ireland with effect from 1 September 2022, in accordance with the announcement I made in September 2021.

The new regulations are necessary as each year, some 1,300 people die prematurely in Ireland due to air pollution from solid fuel burning. It is estimated that there are over 16,200 life years lost, while many people also experience a poor quality of life due to the associated short-term and long-term health impacts of this form of pollution. I remain committed to addressing this critical public health and environmental challenge.

EU Regulations

52. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of compliance monitoring reports undertaken by an organisation (details supplied) under SI No. 358/2020 - European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020; his views on the level of compliance under SI. No. 358/2020 based on those reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12003/22]

53. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on the compliance monitoring reports undertaken by an organisation (details supplied) under SI No. 358/2020 - European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020; the engagements that have taken place regarding these reports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12004/22]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 52 and 53 together. 52 and 53 together.

The purpose of SI No. 358/2020 - European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020 is to make public sector websites and mobile applications more accessible for users and in particular for users with disabilities by making them perceivable, operable, understandable and robust. It names the National Disability Authority (NDA) as the monitoring body for compliance with the regulations. It requires the NDA to publish a report on its monitoring activities every 3 years. The first of these reports was published at the beginning of the year and can be found here .

The organisation referred to in the Question is under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs and as such I have no role in the reporting of that body. I understand the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs provides funding to the organisation to support their monitoring role.

Question No. 53 answered with Question No. 52.

Electric Vehicles

54. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to provide the necessary charging points required in public spaces to support persons who are purchasing electric vehicles in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11973/22]

55. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Transport the number of electric charging points that are now operational in public areas in each local authority area broken down by fast chargers and ordinary chargers in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11974/22]

56. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Transport the number of electric vehicle home chargers that have been grant aided by his Department in each year since the commencement of the scheme; the cost of the scheme on an annual basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11975/22]

84. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the expected timeframe for the publication of the national charging infrastructure; the details of the engagements with relevant stakeholders on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12002/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 54, 55, 56 and 84 together.

The Deputy will be aware that Ireland has set an ambitious target of 936,000 EVs on our roads by 2030 that reflects the scale of the transformation needed to achieve its climate targets in the coming years. Under the National Development Plan €1bn has been allocated to specific carbon reduction measures, including vehicle electrification.

The Government is fully committed to supporting a significant expansion and modernisation of the electric vehicle charging network over the coming years. A national charging infrastructure strategy is being developed which will set out a pathway to stay ahead of demand over the critical period out to 2030. My Department is engaging with relevant stakeholders to inform this work and it is envisaged that the strategy will be published for consultation in early 2022.

Preparations are underway to establish an Office of Low Emission Vehicles. This Office will play an important role in our transition to zero emission vehicles. It will co-ordinate measures to support the uptake of EVs and the rollout of charge point infrastructure.

In terms of existing supports for public charging, the Public Charge Point Scheme continues to be available during 2021 to provide local authorities with a grant of up to €5,000 to support the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of the scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate owners of electric vehicles, who do not have access to a private parking space, but instead rely on parking their vehicles in public places near their homes to charge their EVs. My Department is reviewing the Scheme at present to ensure that it is as effective as possible in driving the decarbonisation effort.

I am also aware that a report was published by the CCMA on the provision of guidance to local authorities on the provision of charging infrastructure. The document is available for viewing online at www.lgma.ie/en/publications/general-publications/local-authority-electrification-of-fleet-and-ev-charging-guidance.pdf.

Having an effective and reliable recharging network is essential to enabling drivers to choose electric. Charging at home is the most convenient and cheapest way to recharge. Targeting the installation of smart home chargers is a priority as we look to moving towards more energy efficient and sustainable ways to charge. A grant is available from the SEAI for those individuals seeking to install a home charger. The below table outlines the number of electric vehicle home chargers that have been grant aided in each year since the commencement of the scheme and the value of the same.

Year	No.	Grant aid
2018	1,034	€621,000
2019	2,548	€1,528,828
2020	3,523	€2,114,000
2021	8,379	€5,019,380
Total	15,484	€9,283,208

Work is currently being progressed to expand the EV home charger grant to include shared parking in apartment blocks and similar developments. My Department is working closely with the SEAI and expects a scheme for apartments to open in the near future.

There is also a need for a seamless public charging network that will provide for situations or instances where home charging is not possible such as on-street and residential charging, destination charging, and workplace charging.

2 March 2022

€10 million was committed from the Climate Action Fund to support ESB investment in the charging network and this has leveraged a further €10 million investment from ESB, with the infrastructure to be in place by the end of 2022. This intervention alone will result in:

- 90 additional high-power chargers, each capable of charging two vehicles - Seventeen high-power chargers distributed across 14 multi-vehicle hubs have been delivered as part of the programme to date.

- 52 additional fast chargers, which may replace existing standard chargers -This work is completed at 36 locations.

- 264 replacement standard chargers with more modern technology and with each consisting of two charge points - This work is substantially complete, 258 of the chargers have now been successfully replaced.

Further details on the progression of this project can be found at esb.ie/ecars/our-network/network-upgrades.

My Department is also developing a new scheme which will support the installation of destination charge points in locations such as hotels, visitor centres and parks. This new initiative will help provide another critical link in the overall network for public charging.

In light of the ESB eCars responsibility in the matter of the provision of charge points, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the ESB for direct response. Please contact my Office if no reply is received within 10 working days.

Question No. 55 answered with Question No. 54.

Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 54.

Aviation Industry

57. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport when his Department will commence work to devise a new national aviation policy. [11842/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Work on a new National Aviation Policy (NAP) is expected to resume in 2022. While the principal goals and objectives of the NAP published in 2015 remain valid, much has changed in terms of the overall challenges for the aviation sector in Ireland with a heightened focus on environmental sustainability and of course recovery from the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The process of developing a new strategy for the sector will entail appropriate public consultation as well as close engagement with the aviation industry through the structures of the National Civil Aviation Development Forum.

Aviation Industry

58. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if Ireland will seek to reach a deal with the United States of America in order that stringent compliant catering regulations on flights to America can be eased. [11843/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): In 2018, the United States Customs and Border Protection (US CBP) introduced a pilot Agricul-

tural Preclearance Test Program for compliant catering which allowed business jets fly directly from Shannon Airport to any US airport. The local inflight caterer in Shannon had been approved by US CBP to supply catering which was in compliance with US CBP and US import requirements. At the US arrival airport, it meant that there were no special requirements for disposal of the international food waste after the flight had been precleared in Shannon under the Agricultural Preclearance Test Program. Four flights were successfully tested under the programme which was then suspended for a review. From that point, the approval to recommence the program has rested with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and all the procedures have been in place for a recommencement of the program.

The Department of Transport has engaged with the Irish Agricultural Counsellor in Washington who met with representatives of the US Department of Homeland Security and USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to stress the potential benefits of the compliant catering program and made efforts to advance its recommencement.

However, the USDA APHIS position is that currently, the safeguarding regulations do not allow the expansion of preclearance beyond the pilot compliant catering program that was conducted in 2018. Implementing this program would require a regulatory change and has other impacts that would need to be considered. The regulatory change required is complex and could take a considerable amount of time to conclude (potentially up to three years and beyond). If the regulatory change is made, it could not be made for Shannon Airport only.

The Irish side continues to work with the US side to seek to expand the number of airports in the US where business jets from Shannon can be precleared before arrival under the existing legal framework. Recently, a further four airports have been added to the approved list where business jets that are precleared in Shannon can fly directly into. This now brings the total number of accessible airports in the U.S to 249 today

The Department of Transport will continue to engage with the US side, including at the Preclearance Consultative Group meetings, with a view to continuing to expand the number of airports in the US where business jets can fly into having been precleared in Shannon Airport.

Public Transport

59. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider introducing a monthly or annual travel pass that allows public transport users to use various modes of transport and provide for more integrated public transport in the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11853/22]

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, nor decision making 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 impact of COVID on commuter travelling patterns, with a potential move away from a regular 5-day commute, the NTA is evaluating the possibility of a new flexi tax-saver commuter ticket. My Department has held discussions with the NTA and also with the Department of Finance on this issue. The NTA is proceeding with the detailed technical work associated with the introduction of a more flexible Tax-saver product.

In light of the Authority's responsibility in this area, I have forwarded the Deputy's question

in relation to the possible introduction of a monthly or annual travel pass to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Road Projects

60. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the projected timelines for the next stage of the Ardee bypass; the targeted timelines for commencement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11891/22]

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 includes the N52 Ardee Bypass.

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

61. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will engage with Irish Rail and the NTA in respect of reopening Dunleer railway station in order to enhance public transport options in the area; if he will provide a schedule of all Irish Rail owned railway stations that are currently on main lines and branch lines by county that are not operational; and the totality of the costs associated with their maintenance and security for the past five years to date. [11932/22]

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 provision, operation, and maintenance of public transport.

The issues raised by the Deputy regarding the possible reopening of railway stations and the costs associated with the maintenance and security of stations that are not operational, are matters for Iarnród Éireann in conjunction with the National Transport Authority and I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's questions to Iarnród Éireann for direct reply.

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

Public Transport

62. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Transport if private coach and bus operators will be included in the scheme to reduce fares by 20% on all public service obligation routes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11937/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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 PSO public

transport every day.

€54m in Exchequer funding has been secured to allow for the introduction of these discounted fares; this funding does not include an extension of the scheme to private coach and bus operators. As the Deputy is aware, unlike with PSO services, the National Transport Authority (NTA) do not set, monitor or regulate fares on services run by commercial operators.

Licensed bus operators are an integral part of the overall public transport system particularly in areas which are not covered by existing public service bus and rail services. In recognition of this, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the Government have provided temporary financial supports for certain licensed commercial services with a view to protecting capacity across the public transport sector throughout the crisis. To date c.€60m has been provided to support the Commercial Bus Operators during this challenging time.

Public Transport

63. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consult with the NTA in respect of initiating an additional project to be delivered in parallel with the DART+ West project that will bring passenger dart services to Kilcock town in addition to a proposed train depot in Kilcock, County Kildare. [11941/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In consultation with Iarnród Éireann, the National Transport Authority (NTA), which has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure including rail in the Greater Dublin Area, is progressing the various projects of the DART+ Programme. These projects, of which DART+ West is one, are at different stages of planning and development.

The approval by Government last December of the DART+ Preliminary Business Case, permits not only the purchase of additional DART fleet but also for the DART+ West project to enter the statutory planning process, subject to the completion of the necessary planning and environmental documentation.

Further extensions to DART services in the years ahead are being considered as part of the NTA's review of the Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area which, as the Deputy may be aware, was recently subject to public consultation. The revised draft Strategy does propose extending DART services beyond Maynooth; however, the focus is on completing the delivery of the DART+ Programme, as it must be, in order to allow for later consideration of further extensions to the Programme.

Public Transport

64. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the progress to date in respect of introducing the new half price public transport fare for young persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11953/22]

65. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport if the 20% reduction in public transport fares as part of measures to help with the cost of living will cover all public service obligation services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11954/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 64 and 65 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 all PSO services until the end of 2022. These discounted fares will benefit the hundreds of thousands of people across the country who use PSO public transport every day. €54m in Exchequer funding has been secured to allow for the introduction of these discounted fares.

Also, in recognition of the importance of incentivising young people to use public transport, as part of Budget 2022 I secured €25m of funding to provide for the introduction of a young adult card (YAC) which will allow any person nationwide who is between 19 and 23 years old, to avail of an entitlement for discounted travel costs, and to increase the level of discount over and above the current student discount to an average of discount of 50% across all services, including city, intercity and rural services. It is envisaged that the discount will initially be made available on PSO services, and then broadened to include commercial operators at a later date. This will not only promote modal shift in the transport sector among this age group but should also contribute towards a reduced reliance on private transport with associated benefit of transport emission savings.

In light of the NTA's responsibility in this area, I have forwarded the Deputy's specific question in relation to the inclusion of commercial bus operators in the schemes, to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Question No. 65 answered with Question No. 64.

Bus Services

66. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the BusConnects roll-out in Dublin following the launch of two sections of the new network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11955/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, including the BusConnects programme.

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.

Active Travel

67. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of the 248 new posts for active travel teams in local authorities that have been filled; the number that currently remain outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11956/22]

68. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the breakdown of the 248 new posts for active travel teams in local authorities by county, in tabular form; the number that have been filled to date; the number of vacancies at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11957/22]

72. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport if there are measures in place to encourage and support the expenditure of the public monies provided by his Department via the National Transport Authority for sustainable and active travel projects such as the provision of additional capacity in local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11961/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 67, 68 and 72 together.

My Department announced funding in January 2021 for up to 248 new jobs in local authorities to expand walking and cycling facilities all over the country. This increase in resourcing reflects the €1.8bn of funding committed for walking and cycling over the planned lifetime of the Government. The additional staff will be dedicated to delivering and promoting Active Travel in Ireland and will work across design, communication, community liaison and construction oversight.

As of 1 January 2022 I can confirm that 117 additional staff have been recruited to work in Active Travel in local authorities across the country. In addition, 39 positions are currently 'pending', meaning interviews have either been completed or are ongoing, and the positions are expected to be filled shortly. Once these pending positions are filled, the total staff numbers will be 156. Recruitment processes are ongoing and it is expected that all the remaining positions will be filled in 2022.

It is important to note that there is strong competition for staff given the strength of the economy and the fact that COVID-19 has impacted the traditional movement of potential recruits around Europe.

Details of the current staffing levels are set out in the table below.

Local Authority	Staffing Levels 1st Jan 2021	Current Staffing Levels 1st Jan 2022	Pending Positions offered/interviews conducted) to be recruited in 2022	Total 2022 (Current and Pending)
Carlow County Council	0	2	2	4
Cavan County Council	0	2	1	3
Clare County Council	0	3	2	5
Cork City Council	1	7	10	17
Cork County Council	6	11	1	12
Donegal County Council	0	3	1	4
Dublin City Council	20	22	0	22
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	2	8	2	10
Fingal County Council	0	9	0	9

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Local Authority	Staffing Levels 1st Jan 2021	Current Staffing Levels 1st Jan 2022	Pending Positions offered/interviews conducted) to be recruited in 2022	Total 2022 (Current and Pending)
Galway City Council	9	12	0	12
Galway County Council	0	0	0	0
Kerry County Council	0	3	0	3
Kildare County Council	0	7	1	8
Kilkenny County Council	0	2	1	3
Laois County Council	0	3	0	3
Leitrim County Council	0	4	0	4
Limerick City and County Council	4	19	2	21
Longford County Council	0	3	1	4
Louth County Council	0	2	2	4
Mayo County Council	0	1	0	1
Meath County Council	4	9	3	12
Monaghan County Council	0	3	1	4
Offaly County Council	0	4	1	5
Roscommon County Council	0	2	0	2
Sligo County Council	0	1	1	2
South Dublin County Council	4	8	0	8
Tipperary County Council	0	3	1	4
Waterford City and County Council	3	8	4	12
Westmeath County Council	0	1	1	2
Wexford County Council	0	1	1	2
Wicklow County Council	4	11	0	11
Total	57	174	39	213

Question No. 68 answered with Question No. 67.

Departmental Expenditure

69. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the €240 million funding for 468 sustainable travel projects in a funding programme directed at the four Dublin councils, the three other counties in the greater Dublin area, that is, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow and the local authorities covering the regional cities, that is, Cork City Council, Cork County Council, Limerick City and County Council, Galway City Council and Waterford City and County Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11958/22]

70. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the €72.8 million funding for 340 sustainable transport projects in 19 local authority areas allocated in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11959/22]

71. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport if the funding not yet disbursed under the two significant allocations for sustainable travel projects in 2021, €240 million and €72.8 million respectively has been carried over into 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11960/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 69 to 71, inclusive, together.

The Programme for Government committed that €360 million in cross-Government funding will be spent on walking and cycling per annum over the lifetime of the Government. This investment will help support the delivery of almost 1,000 kilometres of improved walking and cycling infrastructure by 2025 as well as additional investment in Greenways.

In 2021 my Department allocated €240 million to support the addition of 233 new walking and cycling projects in the Greater Dublin Area and Regional Cities. Last year I was also delighted to announce an allocation of €72.8m for 340 sustainable transport projects in 19 local authorities for the first ever Active Travel investment programme for rural local authorities.

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. The NTA work with the local authorities to determine the projects and precise funding allocations for the current year. The full list of allocations is then published on the NTA's website. In 2021 unspent capital funding was carried into 2022 as approved by my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Question No. 70 answered with Question No. 69.

Question No. 71 answered with Question No. 69.

Question No. 72 answered with Question No. 67.

Electric Vehicles

73. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of electric hybrid buses in operation on public service obligation transport routes at present; the areas that these are operational in; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11962/22]

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 procurement of the PSO bus fleet.

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.

Rail Network

74. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made to date in the development and expansion of railway services essential for the transition to low or zero-carbon transport options; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11963/22]

75. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made to date in the enhancing of rail services in regional cities, including commuter services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11964/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 74 and 75 together.

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 of the development, expansion, and enhancement of railway services is a matter first and foremost for the National Transport Authority (NTA) in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann, and I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's questions to the NTA for direct reply.

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

Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 74.

Road Safety

76. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of schools that have benefited from the safe routes to schools programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11965/22]

77. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to expand the safe routes to schools programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11966/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 76 and 77 together.

In March 2021, I was delighted to launch the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Programme which will support Active Travel infrastructure for selected schools around the country. The Programme aims to support walking, scooting and cycling to primary and post-primary schools and to create safer walking and cycling routes within communities. This will help alleviate congestion at school gates and increase the number of students who walk or cycle to school by providing the necessary infrastructure.

All schools were eligible to apply to the Programme and information was circulated from the Departments of Education and Transport to schools nationwide. By the deadline of 16th April 2021, 931 applications had been received from schools in every county in Ireland. 170 schools were notified on 21st June that they have been selected for inclusion in the first round of the SRTS Programme

€15m has been allocated for projects at the 170 schools included in Round One. The subsequent schools will be engaged with on a rolling basis in each local authority area. This funding is being provided from the €1.8 billion funding earmarked in the Programme for Government to support sustainable transport.

It is important to note that all Active Travel funding looks to improve links to schools where possible, not only the Safe Routes to School Programme. The required investment at each school will be dependent on the changes required in each particular case. As most interventions at/near applicable schools will take time to implement, particularly if they require planning permission, the €15m budget will extend beyond 2022. The budget for cycle parking element of SRTS in 2022 will be €3m.

The schools selected were assessed against a range of criteria including school type, location and the school's commitment to sustainable travel.

Schools that have applied this year which have not been included in the first round of funding will not be required to reapply as they will come into the Programme on a rolling basis.

Question No. 77 answered with Question No. 76.

Departmental Schemes

78. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of recipients of the wheelchair accessible vehicle grant scheme since the year of its introduction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11967/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including the administration of the wheelchair accessible vehicle grant scheme, 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.

Public Transport

79. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the support from his Department to help make all public transport services accessible, in particular public transport outside the capital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11968/22]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for promoting the development of an accessible, integrated and accessible public transport network. In addition, the NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. It is the public transport operators, for example Bus Éireann, that have responsibility for delivering and operating public transport services, in conjunction with the NTA.

Furthermore, the NTA has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme which operates under the TFI Local Link brand.

In light of the NTA's responsibilities for accessible public transport services, in both urban and rural areas, I have forwarded your question to the NTA for a direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Aviation Industry

80. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport when transatlantic flights will resume from Shannon Airport; the supports which have been provided to the Shannon Group to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11969/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Shannon Airport is forecasting close to one million passengers in 2022 with 3 airlines and 25 routes expected for Summer 2022, compared to 6 airlines and 30 routes pre-COVID-19. Aer Lingus transatlantic services to Boston are expected to return on 10 March and New York on 11 March 2022. The United Airlines daily Newark seasonal service will recommence on 27 March.

During the COVID-19 crisis Shannon Group benefited from a suite of measures to support businesses across the economy, including but not limited to, the wage subsidy scheme, grants, a commercial rates waiver, deferred tax liabilities and the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme. These supports to Shannon Group totalled almost €17 million in 2020 and 2021. In an effort to protect jobs in the Mid-West, emergency operational funding of €105,000 was also provided to Shannon Group by my Department in 2020 to ensure two Castles, Bunratty and King John's, operated by Shannon Heritage could remain open at that time.

In addition to these supports, over €22.7 million in aviation sector-specific supports have been allocated to Shannon Airport in 2020 and 2021. Over €6 million of this funding was in the form of capital grants under the Covid-19 Regional State Airports Programme in 2021. Funding under this Programme targeted safety & security related operations as well as projects which focused on reducing emissions and building climate resilience at airports. Over €5.5 million in operational support was also provided under this Programme in 2021, funding 100% of eligible operational costs at Shannon Airport last year.

Additional emergency capital funding of €5.65m has also been provided to Shannon Airport in 2020 and 2021 for a Hold Baggage Screening (HBS) project and an Embankments project. A further €5.5m was provided to Shannon Airport under the Department's Covid Supplementary Support Scheme to Irish airports. This funding has provided Shannon Airport with flexibility to roll out route incentives/charge rebates, in consultation with airlines, with a view to supporting recovery and growth of connectivity.

A summary of funding provided to Shannon Group over 2020 and 2021 is outlined as follows:

Shannon Group	2020		2021		TOTAL
	Current €m	Capital €m	Current €m	Capital €m	€m
Horizontal Supports (approx.)	€8.40		€8.24		€16.64
Covid Support to Shannon Heritage	€0.11				€0.11
Emergency Capital Support		€0.30		€5.35	€5.65
Covid-19 Regional State Airports Programme 2021			€5.53	€6.07	€11.60
Covid Supplementary Support Scheme			€5.49		€5.49
TOTAL	€8.51	€0.30	€19.26	€11.42	€39.49

This year, funding of €36 million will be provided under the Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025, supporting regional airports of Shannon, Cork, Ireland West, Donegal and Kerry. This budget allocation represents a significant increase in funding available under the Programme in 2022, which takes account of the broadening of the Programme to include both Cork and Shannon Airports. In addition to this, funding of €1.1m will be provided to Shannon Airport in 2022 for the completion of the airports HBS and Embankments projects.

The National Aviation Policy recognises the important role of Shannon Airport in the economic and social fabric of Mid-West Region. Funding of almost €40 million provided to Shannon Group since 2020 is a clear indication of the importance Government attaches to Shannon Group being well positioned for recovery and growth into the future.

Departmental Policies

81. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made to date in respect of the development of drone policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11970/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is in the process of developing an overarching national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). The aim of the policy framework is to set out the vision, strategy, and priorities for the development of the UAS sector in Ireland. The framework will guide high-level strategic planning and development of the UAS sector over the short to medium term with the aim of supporting growth and innovation in the UAS sector while managing safety, security, environmental and other aspects. This will set out a roadmap for future activity, in response to the EU regulatory requirements and to the rapidly growing drone market, dealing with aviation aspects and broader whole-of-government aspects.

A steering group to oversee the work was established in July 2021, shortly followed by the establishment of three working groups. Membership of the steering group and working groups is drawn from primary stakeholders from relevant Government Departments and agencies to facilitate the development of a comprehensive and integrated policy. A targeted stakeholder consultation is currently underway, with a wider public consultation on a draft policy framework planned for Q2 2022 with the aim of publishing the finalised policy framework later in 2022.

Driver Test

82. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of heavy goods vehicle driving tests provided; the pass rate from 1 September 2021 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11971/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Road Safety Authority is responsible for the operation of the driving test service and the information requested is held by them. 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.

Public Transport

83. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider a proposal by a group (details supplied) in the context of his evaluation of a draft strategy for the MetroLink project. [11984/22]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): MetroLink is likely the largest ever public investment project in the history of the State and has been subject to extensive non-statutory public consultation since 2018. The strategic rationale for a metro corridor from north to south Dublin has been well established in numerous strategic transport frameworks, including most recently the statutory Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area.

The Preferred Route for the MetroLink project is that as consulted upon in 2019 and extends from North Dublin to Charlemont as available to view on the project's dedicated website www.metrolink.ie. The Preliminary Business Case for the project, as well as the environmental impact assessment reports and other associated planning documentation, is prepared on the basis of that Preferred Route.

Subject to Government approval in the coming months, the project will proceed to the statutory planning process with submission of a Railway Order application to An Bord Pleanála and will then be subject to further public consultation as part of that process.

It is my strong belief that we urgently need to see progress on delivery of major public transport infrastructure projects, including MetroLink. It is my view that this focus on delivery is one shared by both citizens and political representatives and, while I recognise there will always be different perspectives on the details of major projects such as MetroLink, my aim is to see this project move into construction. In that regard I think it important to note that substantial changes to the planning and design of the project as evolved since 2018 through extensive public consultation will add significant delay to the delivery of the project

Question No. 84 answered with Question No. 54.

Land Issues

85. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if NAMA could make part or all of the land it owns or controls at a site (details supplied) available for public use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11912/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy may be aware, NAMA does not typically own or control properties; rather NAMA owns loans for which the properties act as security. The properties securing NAMA's loans are owned and controlled by their registered owners, or appointed receivers in the case of enforcement.

The Deputy will appreciate that, under Sections 99 and 202 the NAMA Act and in line with normal banking confidentiality, NAMA is legally precluded from disclosing information relating to debtors or their properties. However, I am advised that NAMA's involvement with the referenced property ended in 2018 when the property was sold by its owner and NAMA released its charge accordingly.

Land Issues

86. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if land (details supplied) can be made available for public use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11913/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to inform the Deputy that the management of State Property is a matter for the Office of Public Works (OPW). The OPW are under the aegis of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). As such, I suggest that queries on the use and management of any such land be directed to that Department who are better placed to respond regarding such queries.

In the interest of providing assistance to the Deputy with his query, my Department consulted with DPER and the OPW on this matter. Following consultation, the OPW advised that they can find no record of the mentioned property on their records or under the records of the State Property Registry for the Department of Finance.

Land Issues

87. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if land (details supplied) can be made available for public use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11914/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to inform the Deputy that the management of State Property is a matter for the Office of Public Works (OPW). The OPW are under the aegis of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). As such, I suggest that queries on the use and management of any such land be directed to that Department who are better placed to respond regarding such queries.

In the interest of providing assistance to the Deputy with his query, my Department consulted with DPER and the OPW on this matter. Following consultation, the OPW advised that they can find no record of the mentioned property on their records or under the records of the State Property Registry for the Department of Finance.

Credit Unions

88. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance when he will be making the regulatory changes to enable credit unions to significantly increase their footprint in the mortgage market and honour the commitment in the Programme for Government for credit unions to become a key provider of community banking further to an article (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12030/22]

89. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to make the necessary regulatory changes to enable credit unions to significantly increase their footprint in the mortgage market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12156/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 88 and 89 together.

This Government recognises the importance of credit unions.

The Programme for Government contains commitments to;

- Review the policy framework within which Credit Unions operate.
- Enable and support the Credit Union movement to grow.
- Support Credit Unions in the expansion of services, to encourage community development.

Credit unions can and do provide mortgages, with over half the sector engaging in mortgage lending at some level. As at December 2021 credit unions had a mortgage book of approximately €280 million, which had grown 23% year-on-year.

The level of mortgage lending undertaken by individual credit unions varies. 20 credit unions account for approximately 76 per cent of all new house loans in the sector with 50 credit unions accounting for 98 per cent of the sector total.

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 of up to 15% available to credit unions on approval by the Central Bank.

4 credit unions are currently approved for the 15% combined lending limit with 1 additional application to the Central Bank currently in progress. Up to 66 credit unions could apply for this 15% limit and it is the Government's hope that more will continue to do so.

In regard to fulfilling the commitments in the Programme for Government for credit unions, the Review of Policy Framework is in its final stages with a summary list of proposals having recently been shared with all the credit union representative bodies. A final stakeholder engagement session has been scheduled for early March. Legislative proposals arising will go to Cabinet shortly thereafter. The proposals being considered should assist credit unions to invest in collaborative ventures, which could also be used to expand their mortgage offering.

Question No. 89 answered with Question No. 88.

Credit Unions

90. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to fulfil the commitment in the Programme for Government for credit unions to become a key provider of community banking. [12157/22]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Programme for Government includes a number of commitments in relation to the credit union sector. The Review of Policy Framework is in its final stages with a summary list of proposals having recently been shared with all the credit union representative bodies. A final stakeholder engagement session has been scheduled for early March. Legislative proposals arising will go to Cabinet shortly thereafter.

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.

Office of Public Works

91. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will request an update from OPW officials in relation to the expected timeline for the removal of fencing located in the Old Abbey in Drogheda (details supplied); the details of plans to address the conditional issues which led to the installation of the fencing; if he will provide other information that he may have in relation to this historic section of town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11865/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan): I am advised by the Commissioners of Public Works that the property known as The Abbey of St. Mary d’Urso is not in the care of the OPW and it is understood that it is in the ownership of Louth Co. Council. There may be a perception locally that OPW owns the Abbey as it is located immediately behind the Garda Station at Connolly Way. OPW however, has no connection with the property.

Flood Risk Management

92. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the OPW will take into charge an issue regarding erosion at a private property (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12027/22]

93. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there are planned works to be carried out at the Fenit Bank at the entrance to Fenit Island (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12028/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 92 and 93 together.

Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each Local Authority to investigate and address. Where necessary, Local Authorities may put forward proposals to relevant central Government Departments, including the Office of Public Works, for funding of appropriate measures depending on the infrastructure or assets under threat.

Under the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme, applications are considered for projects that are estimated to cost not more than €750,000 in each instance. Funding of up to 90% of the cost is available for approved projects. Applications are assessed by the OPW having regard to the specific economic, social and environmental criteria of the scheme, including a cost benefit ratio and having regard to the availability of funding for flood risk management. Full details of this scheme are available on www.opw.ie.

The OPW has no applications under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme from Kerry County Council in respect of flooding in this area.

Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 92.

An Teanga Gaeilge

94. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** den Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán cuntas a thabhairt ar an mbéim shonrach ar an dáileadh méadaithe i mBuiséad 2021 maidir le hearnálacha na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta, go sonrach i dtaobh chur i bhfeidhm Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [11931/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Forálann Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2021 d'athchóiriú a dhéanamh ar an mbealach a bheartaímid do sholáthar seirbhísí poiblí Gaeilge ar ardchaighdeán do phobal na Gaeilge. Is tionscadal fadtéarmach é seo a bhfuil taighde cuimsitheach agus forbairt Plean Náisiúnta um Sholáthar Seirbhísí Poiblí trí mheán na Gaeilge ina chroílár. I láthair na huair, táim ag obair i gcomhar le hoifigigh mo Roinne chun éifeacht a thabhairt d'fhorálacha an Achta sa tréimhse amach romhainn. Chuige sin, tá plean oibre forbartha ag oifigigh mo Roinne ina leagtar amach na céimeanna éagsúla atá le glacadh sna míonna amach romhainn chun forálacha an Achta a fheidhmiú.

Is í mo phríomhthosaíocht ag an tráth seo próiseas a reáchtáil ar mhaithe le beirt comhalta a earcú a bheidh ionadaíoch ar an gCoiste Comhairleach a bhfuil foráil déanta dó san Acht ar son phobal labhartha na Gaeilge taobh istigh agus taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Tá an réamhobair don phróiseas sin tosaithe ag an tSeirbhís um Cheapacháin Phoiblí i gcomhar le hoifigigh mo Roinne.

Leis an Acht nua seo, tá bunsraith láidir leagtha síos dúinn, mar Stát, chun fíorcheannaireacht a léiriú i dtaobh an teanga a chaomhnú do na glúinte atá le teacht. Tagann forálacha an Achta i gcomhréir le huailmhian bheartais fhoriomlán an Stáit maidir le tacú leis an nGaeilge agus maidir leis an nGaeilge a chur chun cinn. Ní mhiste a lua gur togra uile-Rialtais é seo nach mbeidh dírithe ar allúntais airgeadais amháin agus go mbeidh oibleagáidí orainn go léir trasna an státhóras maidir lena fhorfheidhme.

Tá acmhainní breise faighte agam laistigh de leithdháileadh mo Roinne i mBuiséad 2022 chun dlús a chur le cur i bhfeidhm na reachtaíochta nua, chomh maith le hacmhainní breise a sholáthar d'Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga i mbliana chun córais mhonatóireachta na hoifige sin a neartú. Tá earcú na n-acmhainní foirne breise seo beagnach críochnaithe ag mo Roinn.

Tá beartaithe agam, thar na míonna amach romhainn, sraith seimineár faisnéise a eagrú do chomhlachtaí poiblí maidir le forálacha an Achta nua, agus tús a chur le hailt ábhartha den Acht ar bhonn chéimiúil.

Waterways Issues

95. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the extent to which the Royal Canal boundaries are defined on either side of the canal from Clonsilla train station to Castleknock train station; and if he will provide a map displaying the boundaries of this section. [11821/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Waterways Ireland has stated that on the towpath side or the south side of the Royal Canal, the boundary is generally clearly defined and is often bounded by the adjacent railway line.

On the north bank of the canal, the boundary is mainly comprised of trees and shrub material, so this boundary is not as clearly defined on the ground as the south side of the canal.

Boundary maps of the section of the Royal Canal from Clonsilla train station to Castleknock train station are attached for reference purposes. The agency has prepared these maps based on desktop analysis only and no surveying has been carried out. Boundaries, particularly on the north side of the canal, may be subject to adjustment once formal registration process commences.

If further clarification is sought regarding the boundary detail at a specific location between Clonsilla and Castleknock, I am informed that Waterways Ireland is willing to engage directly with the Deputy to clarify this matter.

Waterways Ireland can be contacted about this matter via email at ceooffice@waterwaysireland.org

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-03-03_pq95a-2-03-22_en.pdf] Map 1

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-03-03_pq95b-2-03-22_en.pdf] Map 2

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-03-03_pq95c-2-03-22_en.pdf] Map 3

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2022-03-03_pq95d-2-03-22_en.pdf]

Defective Building Materials

96. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of an application made by Clare County Council for a pyrite redress scheme for homeowners in County Clare. [11844/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department received a submission from Clare County Council, dated 23 July 2021, requesting the extension of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme to County Clare. A response issued to the Council on 3 August 2021 indicating that my Department would review the submission and it also sought a detailed breakdown of costs associated with the Report. A breakdown of costs associated with the Report was received on 28 September 2021.

In order to progress matters a meeting was held on 9 November 2021 between officials from my Department and Clare County Council to review issues which required further elaboration in order to evidentially support an extension of the defective concrete blocks grant scheme to County Clare. My Department subsequently wrote to Clare County Council on the 6 December, 2021 outlining formally the nature of the clarifications required. Clare County Council undertook to review their submission and address the gaps in evidential data which had been identified by my Department.

My Department received a response with some clarifications from Clare County Council, dated 20 December 2021. It is accepted by Clare County Council in their correspondence of the 20 December that the causative link to actual damage arising from pyrite induced expansion has not been conclusively established in respect of the 5 homes tested to date.

On the 7 February 2022 officials from my Department met with officials from Clare County Council to progress matters. It was confirmed by Clare County Council that samples from five other properties are now being tested in accordance with the I.S. 465 protocol. If evidence of pyrite induced expansion is evident within the blockwork samples taken from these homes and the necessary causative link to the damage within the homes is established, my Department should be in a position to recommend to Government that an extension of the scheme to Clare would be legislated for.

The extension of the scheme to other local authority areas was considered as part of wider deliberations on the Scheme by Government. I, as Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, may, with Government approval, extend the scheme beyond the counties of Donegal and Mayo to additional counties, where the evidence supports such an extension.

Housing Provision

97. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the provision of social and affordable housing in County Clare. [11845/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Increasing the supply of social and affordable homes is a priority for this Government as shown clearly in the Housing for All strategy. Following the launch of the strategy last September we issued social housing targets to all local authority Chief Executives for the 5 years 2022 to 2026. Of the national target of over 50,000 new social homes, I'm asking Clare County Council

to deliver 833 over those years, through their own projects and also working with the housing associations. Under Housing for All, the funding is in place to support Clare County Council and indeed all the Councils, to get these housing projects built.

I want to acknowledge that Clare County Council - with good support from their public representatives - has always delivered well against their social housing targets to date. They also have a solid pipeline of new projects in place and I'm keen that they advance these as speedily as possible.

For the purpose of tracking social housing delivery, a Social Housing Construction Status Report (CSR) is published each quarter by my Department. This provides details of the individual social housing build projects in the programme of each local authority, including Clare County Council. The CSR provides details of locations of the projects, the number of homes being delivered and the current status of each project, including those currently on site and under construction. The most recently published CSR covers the period up to the end of Quarter 3 of 2021, and is available at the following link:

www.gov.ie/en/publication/feea9-social-housing-construction-projects-status-report-q3-2021/. Information on Quarter 4 of 2021, will be available shortly and will be added to the published data. Further specific information on their build programmes will be available from the local authorities.

The Affordable Housing Act 2021 established a basis for four new affordable housing measures, to 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 First Home shared equity scheme will be available nationally on a demand-led basis. This scheme will primarily support first-time buyers purchasing new homes through the private market. It is anticipated this scheme will be open for applications in the second half of this year. The national 2022 target delivery for the First Home Scheme is 1,750.

At a national level, 2,550 Affordable Purchase homes and 1,580 Cost Rental homes are targeted for delivery for 2022. Annual targets will increase incrementally in subsequent years.

Delivery of affordable housing will be underpinned by Local Authorities' Housing Delivery Action Plans. Having reviewed the submitted Plans, my Department has held meetings with Local Authorities. The information shared in these meetings, and through a two-day Housing Summit held last week with all local authorities, will facilitate more informed target setting for each area. Updated Housing Delivery Action Plans will be published by the local authorities, including Clare County Council, later this year.

Vacant Properties

98. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the consideration that has been given to the proposals from the collaborative town centre health check and other new methods of locating vacant properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11854/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Addressing vacancy and maximising the use of existing housing stock

is a primary concern of this Government, as demonstrated by one of the four pathways dedicated solely to this priority area in the new Housing for All strategy. The most recent figures available from Census 2016 indicate that there were 183,000 vacant homes nationwide, a 20% reduction on figures reported in Census 2011 (230,000) in every local authority across the country. Work is also underway by the Department of Finance through the current Local Property Tax returns to assess the present vacancy situation and once collated and analysed this data will provide a new data set on vacant homes.

Local authorities play a key role at the local level in identifying vacant properties in their area having regard to data collated at the national level such as through the Census and the work of the Department of Finance. I would encourage every local authority to exhaust all of these data sources, including other avenues such as the collaborative town centre health check which is an initiative of the Heritage Council, in identifying vacant properties and bringing them back into productive residential use.

Housing Provision

99. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will supply the details of any proposed cost rental homes in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11917/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under the Housing for All targets, approximately 18,000 Cost Rental homes are to be delivered by Local Authorities, Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and the Land Development Agency (LDA) by 2030. Although the COVID-19 pandemic and construction restrictions impacted on delivery timelines in 2021, a scale up in Cost Rental delivery will occur in the near-term.

Under Budget 2022, €70 million was allocated to the Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) scheme for Cost Rental delivery by AHBs in 2022. Over 900 homes have been approved for funding under the scheme to date, with a total of almost 4,000 CREL-funded homes being targeted for delivery over the 5 years to 2026.

40 CREL-funded Cost Rental homes were tenanted by the Clúid AHB at Barnhall Meadows in Leixlip, Co. Kildare in December 2021, where cost rents charged are approximately 40% below comparable market rents in the area. A further 16 Cost Rental homes will be tenanted in this development by the end of Q2 2022.

Under the Second Call for Proposals for CREL funding, issued to AHBs in October 2021, I have given approval in principle to the allocation of €53.6 million for the provision of 521 Cost Rental homes across 11 sites in 7 Local Authority areas, 486 of which are scheduled to deliver in 2022. Three of these 11 sites, comprising a total of 186 Cost Rental homes, are currently scheduled to be delivered in Kildare in 2022. Details of the funded projects, including locations, unit types and cost-covering rents will be released when the relevant AHBs have completed necessary financial and commercial arrangements.

These properties will make a real difference for people who are struggling to pay rents in the private market. Of the 65 homes delivered under CREL to date, the tenants are paying cost rents that are approximately 40% lower than comparable market rents in their areas.

Housing Provision

100. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will supply the details of any proposed affordable purchase homes in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11918/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Housing for All Strategy delivers on the Programme for Government commitment to step up housing supply and put affordability at the heart of the housing system, with an ambitious target of 300,000 homes over the next decade for social, affordable and cost rental, private rental and private ownership housing.

Measures to deliver this housing are supported by over €4 billion in funding annually, representing the highest ever level of Government investment in building social and affordable housing. 54,000 affordable home interventions will be delivered between now and 2030 to be facilitated by local authorities, Approved Housing Bodies, the Land Development Agency and through a strategic partnership between the State and retail banks.

Delivery of affordable housing, in accordance with the schemes set out in the Affordable Housing Act, 2021 and the funding being made available, will be underpinned by local authorities' Housing Delivery Action Plans. Local authorities, including Kildare County Council, submitted their Plans to me in December 2021. This allowed each local authority to assess the level of demand with affordability constraint in their area based on the Housing Need and Demand Assessment and plan provision accordingly.

Funding to assist the local authority delivery of affordable housing was previously made available through the Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) and is presently available through the Affordable Housing Fund (AHF).

Kildare County Council submitted an application to my Department for SSF funding to assist in the delivery of 10 affordable purchase homes at Ardclough Road, Celbridge, Co Kildare. Funding was approved in principle in August 2019 and this project is currently at planning and design stages. Kildare County Council has advised my Department that it is envisaged that these 10 affordable homes will be delivered early in 2024.

Housing Provision

101. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the Land Development Agency development proposal at Devoy Barracks, Naas, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11919/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Land Development Agency (LDA) has advised my Department that they are expecting to lodge a revised planning application in April 2022 for a development on the 10.08 acre site at Devoy Barracks in Naas. Subject to a successful grant of planning permission, it is envisaged that construction will commence in 2023, with an estimated development programme of approximately 3 years. It is estimated that this site has the potential to provide 221 units.

As this site is currently at the pre-development stage, the exact delivery potential will only be finalised as final plans are put in place and planning permission is secured. The LDA will have regard to Government policy, and all appropriate legislation, on the appropriate tenure mix for developments on public land, as well as the criteria for the operation of cost rental and affordable housing schemes.

As with all State bodies operating under the aegis of my Department, arrangements have

been put in place by the LDA through which Oireachtas members can request information directly from the Agency in relation to operational matters - in this regard, the LDA may be contacted directly at oireachtas@lda.ie.

Housing Provision

102. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on any recent progress with Project Tosaigh; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11920/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Land Development Agency's (LDA) Project Tosaigh is a market engagement initiative to unlock land with full planning permission that is not being developed by private sector owners due to financing and other constraints and use it to accelerate the supply of affordable housing. It allows the LDA to supplement the State lands it is already working on and accelerate the delivery of cost rental and affordable purchase homes by unlocking private land that is ready to be developed but where construction has stalled or not commenced.

The target is delivery of 5,000 new homes by 2026 for affordable cost rental or sale to eligible households under affordable purchase arrangements.

It is characterised by:

- Activation of planning consents that have not commenced or are proceeding more slowly than optimal;
- Achieving delivery both in the near term, as well as providing a 5-year programme of delivery;
- An open and transparent process, compliant with procurement rules;
- A focus on delivery of affordable homes with some social homes to be secured if conditions allow, while securing value for money for the State.

Given the scale of ambition and having taken market soundings, the LDA is working on a dual track approach to running Project Tosaigh.

The first phase of Project Tosaigh involves an initial expressions of interest (EoI) process, launched on 12 November 2021, to engage builders and landowners in forward purchase agreements, with the intention of securing stock in certain developments in the shorter term. This process is targeting lot sizes of c. 150 homes upwards in the Greater Dublin Area (including Dublin City, South Dublin, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown, Fingal, Meath, Kildare, Louth and Wicklow), Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford via forward purchasing agreements.

A very encouraging level of response was achieved and the LDA are working through the large numbers of proposals. Engagement meetings in respect of schemes with the potential to deliver some units (to practical completion) in 2022 have been prioritised. Broad indications of schemes with potential to progress and delivery timelines are expected to be available in the coming weeks.

In parallel, schemes submitted where delivery would be expected to begin in 2023 and thereafter are being reviewed and engagements with parties in respect of those schemes are now underway.

Housing Provision

103. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 109 of 25 January 2022, the status of the review by his Department and the Housing Delivery Coordination Office of the local authority Housing Delivery Action Plans; the number of plans that have been received by his Department to date by local authority; the number of plans reviewed to date; the number of plans approved to date, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11948/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): A key action of Housing for All is that local authorities will develop and submit Housing Delivery Action Plans to include details of social and affordable housing delivery. The Plans set out details of both social and affordable housing delivery as appropriate over the period 2022 - 2026, in line with targets set under Housing for All.

All local authorities submitted their Housing Delivery Action Plans to me in December. My Department is now working closely with each local authority and the Housing Delivery Coordination Office to review the Plans, having regard to the targets and policy objectives set out in Housing for All. This will require further engagement with local authorities in the coming weeks. It is intended to publish the Plans in Quarter 2 of 2022 when this process of assessment and engagement has concluded.

Housing Provision

104. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing and affordable housing projects under construction in Galway city and county by the location address, the number of units, project status and the expected completion date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11949/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): For the purpose of tracking social housing delivery, a Social Housing Construction Status Report (CSR) is published each quarter by my Department. This provides details of the individual social housing build projects in the programme of each local authority, including Galway City and County local authority areas.

The report provides details of locations of the schemes, the number of homes being delivered and the current status of each scheme, including those currently on site and under construction. The most recent CSR publication covers the period up to the end of Quarter 3 of 2021, and is available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/feea9-social-housing-construction-projects-status-report-q3-2021/. Information on Quarter 4 of 2021, will be available shortly and will be added to the published data. Further specific information on their build programmes, including expected completion dates, will be available from the local authorities.

Under Housing for All, the funding is in place to support both Galway local authorities, including approved housing bodies with whom they work, and I'm keen that they progress their social housing schemes as quickly as possible and that they receive the support of public representatives in the advancement of their programmes.

The Affordable Housing Act 2021 established a basis for four new affordable housing measures, to 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 First Home shared equity scheme will be available nationally on a demand-led basis. This scheme will primarily support first-time buyers purchasing new homes through the private market. It is anticipated this scheme will be open for applications in the second half of this year. The national 2022 target delivery for the First Home Scheme is 1,750.

At a national level, 2,550 Affordable Purchase homes and 1,580 Cost Rental homes are targeted for delivery for 2022. Annual targets will increase incrementally in subsequent years.

Delivery of affordable housing will be underpinned by Local Authorities' Housing Delivery Action Plans. Having reviewed the submitted Plans, my Department has held meetings with Local Authorities. The information shared in these meetings, and through a two-day Housing Summit held last week with all local authorities, will facilitate more informed target setting for each area. Updated Housing Delivery Action Plans will be published by the local authorities, including the both Galway authorities, later this year.

Galway City Council received approval in principle from my Department in August 2019 under the Serviced Sites Fund (now the Affordable Housing Fund) for approx. €4.4 million for a project at Merlin Park Lands. It is anticipated that this development will deliver 85 affordable purchase homes and Galway City Council have advised my Department that this project will be completed by 2024.

Additional affordable housing delivery in the two Galway local authorities will also be facilitated through the expanded 20% Part V requirement.

Climate Change Policy

105. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 116 of 16 February 2022, the engagement he or his Department has had with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications with regard to the roll-out of decarbonisation zones in each local authority; his Department's role in the development of the promised guidelines for the implementation of the decarbonising plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11950/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department had responsibility for the initial stage of coordinating the identification of decarbonising zones by Local Authorities under the Climate Action Plan 2019.

Responsibility for coordinating the subsequent development of Decarbonising Zone plans rests with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. Development of the plans is subject to the publication of statutory guidance under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 under the remit of the Minister of Environment, Climate and Communications. Action 80d and 80e in the Climate Action Plan 2021 identifies the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications and the Environmental Protection Agency as having responsibility for developing guidelines for Decarbonising Zones.

Defective Building Materials

106. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and

Heritage the status of the work of the working group to examine defects in housing; when he expects the final report to be completed; his plans for the publication of the final report; the details of interim reports received to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11951/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):

The Programme for Government sets out a number of commitments in respect of the important policy area of addressing building defects. It commits to an examination of defects in housing, having regard to the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing's report, "Safe as Houses?". Housing for All, the Government's national plan on housing to 2030, reiterates this commitment.

In this regard, I established a working group to examine defects in housing. This working group has been meeting monthly since March 2021 (except for August). In addition, regular subgroup meetings take place to advance elements of the work.

The group's terms of reference, adopted in May 2021, are focused on fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in purpose built apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 and 2013. The full terms of reference of the Working Group are to:

1. Examine defects in housing having regard to the recommendations in Item 4 "Addressing the legacy of bad building and poor regulation" in Chapter 4 of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government report - 'Safe as Houses? A Report on Building Standards, Building Controls and Consumer Protection'

2. Establish the nature of significant, wide-spread fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in purpose built apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 – 2013 in Ireland through consultation with affected homeowners, homeowner representative organisations, owners' management companies, relevant managing agents, public representatives, local authorities, product manufacturers, building professionals, industry stakeholders, insurance providers, mortgage providers and other relevant parties. Including such matters as:

- Identification and description of defect,
- Nature of defect – design, product, workmanship,
- Non-compliance with building regulations or actual damage,
- Severity/risk to life or serviceability of dwelling,
- Period of construction affected,
- Type of dwelling affected,
- Location of dwellings affected.

1. Establish the scale of the issue – estimate number of dwellings affected by the defects identified including those already remediated.

2. Consider a methodology for the categorisation of defects and the prioritisation of remedial action.

- In the case of defects with fire safety implications, consider how the framework for enhancing fire safety in dwellings can be applied to mitigate the risks arising from fire safety defects pending the remediation of defects and the Code of Practice for Fire Safety Assessment of Premises and Buildings, which is currently being developed by National Directorate of Fire

and Emergency Management.

1. Suggest mechanisms for resolving defects, in the context of the legal rights, duties and obligations of developers, builders, building professionals, insurers, mortgage providers, building control authorities, fire authorities, owners' management companies, owner occupiers, renters and landlords, including:

- Technical options for the remediation of dwellings,
- Efficient means of carrying out work,
- individual dwellings or whole building approach,
- routine maintenance/refurbishment or remediation,
- Structures or delivery channels needed to facilitate resolution – advice and support.

1. Evaluate the potential cost of technical remediation options.

2. Pursue options on possible financial solutions to effect a resolution, in line with the Programme for Government commitment to identify options for those impacted by defects to access low-cost, long-term finance.

3. Report to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the Examination of Defects in Housing.

In regard to the working group's deliberations, the first round of stakeholder consultation commenced in July 2021 with more detailed follow up and additional stakeholder consultations ongoing at present. A series of online surveys was also launched by the Working Group on 31 January seeking the experiences of homeowners, landlords, Directors of Owners' Management Companies and Property Management Agents. The surveys will run until 14 March 2022 and can be accessed at the following link - www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7e319-online-survey-in-relation-to-defects-in-apartment-and-duplex-buildings/.

The engagement with stakeholders and the online consultation will inform the deliberations of the Working Group and support the delivery on its extensive terms of reference and finalisation of its report.

I am satisfied that the Working Group is working effectively and efficiently on this complex matter, and I look forward to a report later this year following completion of their consultations and deliberations. Once I receive the report I will give full consideration to its contents and I plan to publish it in due course. I have not and do not expect to receive an interim report before submission of the final report.

Local Authorities

107. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of plans to appoint a permanent CEO of Galway County Council; the status of the recruitment campaign; when he expects the new CEO to be in position; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11952/22]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department has advised the Public Appointments Service (PAS) of the requirement to hold a recruitment competition for a replacement permanent Chief Executive in Galway County

Council and it is now a matter for PAS to put the necessary recruitment arrangements in place.

There is a requirement for all Chief Executive posts for Local Authorities to be advertised openly on the *www.publicjobs.ie* website operated by PAS and the timing of the advertising of this post is a matter for PAS.

Foreign Conflicts

108. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will put practical measures in place to facilitate Ukrainian citizens who are related to Irish citizens, including grandparents, to take-up residence in Ireland for the duration of the current hostilities; if they can be assisted in physically exiting Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12038/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am pleased that my colleague the Minister for Justice announced on 25 February the lifting of visa requirements for Ukrainian nationals travelling to Ireland in the current context. This became effective immediately and Ukrainian nationals who are considering leaving Ukraine to travel to Ireland can do so without a visa, if they judge it safe to travel. My Department meanwhile continues to provide consular assistance to Irish citizens currently in Ukraine. The situation on the ground remains, of course, very difficult. Ireland is continuing to co-ordinate with our EU partners and others on issues relating to exit routes from Ukraine. Updated travel advice is available at www.dfa.ie/travel for Ukraine, as well as for neighbouring countries that people may be planning to travel to or through.

Election Monitoring Missions

109. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland is prepared to send election observers to Hungary to observe its upcoming elections in April 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11803/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has requested Member States to nominate candidates for the position of Observers for the OSCE ODIHR Election Observation Mission to Hungary for the Parliamentary elections and referendum which are scheduled to take place on 3 April 2022.

This followed the OSCE ODIHR Assessment Mission visit to Budapest at the end of January 2022 and the publication of its report on 4 February 2022 which recommended a full Election Observation Mission with 18 Long-Term Observers and 200 Short-Term Observers.

My Department has approved the nomination of up to three Short-Term Observers from the Department's Election Observation Roster, subject to receiving an anticipated OSCE ODIHR call for STOs.

This is in line with commitments made by fellow EU Member States in supporting this mission. As a member of the likeminded group of EU Member States on the rule of law, Ireland supports the democratic process in Hungary and joins other likeminded EU Member States in supporting the OSCE ODIHR mission.

The final selection of nominated candidates will be made by the OSCE ODIHR.

Passport Services

110. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the passport office will fully reopen in line with operations pre-March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11812/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Since late January, all Passport Service sites in Dublin and Cork have been operating at full capacity following the ending of many Covid-19 public health restrictions, and all services have fully resumed as they were in place before the pandemic.

The Passport Offices in Mount St, Dublin 2 and in Cork offer an Urgent Appointment Service for the renewal of passports. This service was launched in Dublin on 27 September 2021 and in Cork on 26 October 2021. The Passport Office in London launched its Urgent Appointment Service on 1 March.

The Urgent Appointment Service replaced the Rapid Renewal Service and customers availing of this service can renew their passport within 1 or 4 days in Dublin, within 4 days in Cork and within 5 days in London. In February, the Passport Service increased the number of appointments at its public offices by 100%, providing an extra 170 appointments per week.

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

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

There are currently over 160,000 applications in the Passport Service system. While there is a very high volume of applications in the system, this does not represent a backlog. These applications are all being processed in the usual way, with a continuous stream of new applications and a continuous dispatch of completed passports happening every day.

Figures show that of the total number of applications in the system, 57% are fully complete and are being processed by the Passport Service. The other 43% of applications in the system are incomplete, which means the Passport Service is waiting for the applicant to submit the necessary documentation required. While the Passport Service makes every effort to contact applicants in such circumstances, their experience is that many applicants take weeks and sometimes months to send in the necessary documents.

Currently, 45% of adult online renewal applications are processed in one working day, while 99% of online child renewal passports are issued within the advertised processing time of 15 working days.

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.

I strongly urge anyone who is considering travelling overseas this year, particularly families with young children, to check the validity of their passports before booking travel and to apply

for their passports online in plenty of time.

Passport Services

111. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will examine and expedite the passport application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11848/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service has sent a resubmission link to the applicant's parent and has contacted the applicant's parent directly to provide an update on the status of the passport application.

Passport Services

112. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of a first-time baby passport application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11902/22]

113. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application by a person (details supplied) will be examined and expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11903/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 112 and 113 together.

With regard to the specific applications about which the Deputies have enquired, the Passport Service has provided an update on the status of the passport applications to the applicants.

Question No. 113 answered with Question No. 112.

Passport Services

114. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a person (details supplied) will receive a decision on their Irish citizenship application which was submitted in April 2020. [11940/22]

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 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 of the father in this case was registered on 8 April 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. The applications of the children were received on 29 September 2020, and are being stored in a secure environment.

The FBR service operates a transparent general policy of processing applications in order of receipt. FBR staff continue to provide an emergency service for Foreign Birth Registration in cases of exceptional urgency, such as expectant parents, or stateless persons. Such applicants may continue to contact the Passport Service directly.

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.

Cumarsáid Aireachta

115. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha an bhfuil sé chun iarraidh a dhéanamh ar údaráis na Breataine fiosrúchán oifigiúil a dhéanamh faoi chrochadh Phádraig Uí Dhomhnaill as Gaoth Dobhair i Londain sa bhliain 1883 i bhfianaise an eolais úir atá tagtha chun cinn anois sa leabhar *The Queen v Patrick O'Donnell* agus sa scannán den teideal céanna atá le craoladh ar TG4 ar 16 Márta gur go héagórach a daoradh chun báis é; an n-iarraidh sé ar na húdaráis thall leithscéal a ghabháil ó tharla go bhfuil sé soiléir anois gur choinnigh an Breitheamh George Denman ceist thábhachtach de chuid an ghiúiré faoi cheilt ón fhoireann cosanta, ón phreas agus ón chúirt i gcoitinne, rud a d'fhág gur gearradh pionóis an bháis nach raibh tuillte aige ar fhear Ghaoth Dobhair; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [12019/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Dála as an gceist seo maidir le cás stairiúil Phádraig Uí Dhómhnaill a crochadh i 1883 i leith dhúnmharú James Carey. Tugaim faoi deara gur foilsíodh leabhair a bhaineann leis an gcás seo, *The Queen vs Patrick O'Donnell*, le Seán Ó Cuirreáin, agus go ndearnadh scannán arna bhunú ar an scéal seo. Dar ndóigh, is féidir le hobair stairithe, a thugann eolas nua chun solais trí scaoileadh cháipéisí stairiúla, léargas luachmhar a thabhairt dúinn ar an gcaoi a d'fhorbair ócáidí suntasacha inár gcuid staire chomhroinnte, agus cuireann siad le díospóireacht agus tuiscint níos leithne. Tabhairfaidh an Rialtas agus an Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha breithniú cuí ar aon eolas nua atá tagtha chun solais mar thoradh na hoibre seo.

Foreign Conflicts

116. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department will provide practical assistance to Ukrainian citizens who are physically trying to travel to Ireland to live with family members here due to the current hostilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12146/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am pleased that my colleague the Minister for Justice announced on 25 February the lifting of visa requirements for Ukrainian nationals travelling to Ireland. This is effective immediately, and Ukrainian nationals who are considering leaving Ukraine to travel to Ireland can do so without a visa, if they judge it safe to travel.

My Department provides updated travel advice at www.dfa.ie/travel for Ukraine, as well

as for neighbouring countries that people may be planning to travel to, or through. Ireland is continuing to co-ordinate with our EU partners and others on issues relating to exit routes from Ukraine. However, given the current situation on the ground in Ukraine, the capacity of my Department to provide direct consular or other related assistance in the period ahead is very limited.

Foreign Conflicts

117. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the specific sanction aimed at the Russian Federation as a consequence of its assault on Ukraine that will target the funnelling of funds through Russian shell corporations based in the International Financial Services Centre. [12148/22]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): To date, the EU has adopted a broad range of measures in response to Russia's unlawful invasion of Ukraine. These are the most significant sanctions ever adopted by the EU. Many of the sanctions are financial measures, aimed at weakening Russia's economy and its financial system.

Asset freezes and travel bans are now imposed on almost 500 people, including bankers, oligarchs and businesspeople. Asset freezes have also been imposed on three Russian financial institutions (Bank Rossiya, PROMSVYAZBANK and VEB.RF).

The EU has also adopted a series of far-reaching sectoral financial sanctions measures, which are of general application throughout the EU rather than targeting specific corporations or financial centres. The key measures introduced to date:

- restrict the ability of the Russian State and Government, as well as certain entities, to access the EU's capital and financial markets and services;
- extend prohibitions on lending and buying of securities to all five of the major Russian state-owned banks, as well as two private banks;
- prohibit the listing of new shares of Russian state-owned entities on EU trading venues, as well as related services;
- prohibit lending to and purchase of securities from certain Russian state-owned enterprises;
- prohibit the acceptance of deposits exceeding €100,000 from Russian nationals or residents;
- prohibit the EU central securities depositories from holding accounts from Russian clients;
- prohibit the selling of euro-denominated securities to Russian clients;
- prohibit any transactions in the EU with the Central Bank of Russia;
- prohibit investment, participation or contribution to projects co-financed by the Russian Direct Investment Fund;
- prohibit the sale, supply, transfer or export of euro denominated banknotes to Russia or to any natural or legal person, entity or body in Russia, including the Government and the Central Bank of Russia, or for use in Russia; and
- prohibit the provision of specialised financial messaging services to seven Russian banks

(i.e. removal from SWIFT system).

The broad suite of financial sanctions that has been introduced is expected to impact on the financial services sector throughout the EU, including in Ireland. The Minister for Finance may be able to provide more detail on the specific implementation aspects of these financial sanctions in Ireland, including any implications for the International Financial Services Centre.

Passport Services

118. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he is taking to reduce the delays for first-time passport applications; and the number of backlog applications awaiting processing. [12150/22]

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

My Department is working with the Public Appointments Service on a major recruitment drive that has been underway for several months. Since June of 2021, over 300 members of staff at all grades have been assigned to the Passport Service. Additional staff are being assigned on a weekly basis with a goal of reaching staff numbers of 900 which represents a doubling of staff numbers.

It is a priority for the Passport Service to improve processing times for first time applications in 2022. The Passport Service is implementing a number of further measures that will positively impact the current turnaround times and improve customer service:

- Intensive training of new staff and upskilling of existing staff is underway to increase the resources that can process complex applications.

- The Passport Service is actively prioritising first time applications and directing increased resources to processing these complex applications with a view to reducing the current turnaround time.

- A new document management process is being put in place in the coming days that allows for a much quicker turnaround time when an applicant is asked to submit additional documents. Once these documents are received, they will be prioritised and complete applications will be processed in three weeks. This will greatly reduce the waiting time for applicants who are missing documents in their initial application.

We are confident that the measures that have been implemented will help to reduce passport turnaround times in the course of 2022, particularly for first time applications, and will assist the Passport Service in meeting the high demand forecast for this year.

The current passport processing times are:

- 10 working days for Simple Adult online renewals
- 15 working days for Complex or child online renewals
- 40 working days for First Time Applications on Passport Online

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

First time passport applications do take longer to process than renewal applications and there are a number of reasons for this. First time applications are necessarily complex to process, since, in many cases, they are applications for Irish citizenship. The Passport Service must validate the true identity of the applicant and take measures to confirm the applicant's entitlement to Irish citizenship. It is the statutory responsibility of the Passport Service to protect the integrity of the Irish passport. Accordingly, a rigorous analysis process is in place to verify the identity and citizenship status of first time applicants.

In the case of first time passport applications for children, the consent of guardians must also be thoroughly validated.

Due to the intensive analysis and extra measures undertaken by highly trained and experienced staff, first time applications take 40 working days to process. In cases of children whose parents are not Irish citizens, the process can sometimes take longer due to the need to ensure that all of the required supporting documentation to prove the child's entitlement to Irish citizenship is submitted and correct. Due to the high level of complexity with these particular applications, further documentation is often required adding to the processing time.

There are currently over 160,000 passport applications in the system. While there is a very high volume of applications in the system, this does not represent a backlog. There is a continuous stream of new applications and a continuous dispatch of completed passports happening every day. Passport Service figures show that 57% of applications are fully complete and are being processed by the Passport Service. The other 43% of applications in the system are incomplete, which means the Passport Service is waiting for the applicant to submit the necessary documentation required. While the Passport Service makes every effort to contact applicants in such circumstances, their experience is that many applicants take weeks and sometimes months to send in the necessary documents.

I strongly urge anyone who is considering travelling overseas this year, particularly families with young children, to check the validity of their passports before booking travel and to apply for their passports online in plenty of time.

Foreign Conflicts

119. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he is taking to provide aid to individuals and families fleeing violence in Ukraine. [12160/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): I am extremely concerned by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Russia's unjustified and unprovoked attack is causing immense suffering for the people of Ukraine. Russia's war is illegal and immoral, and Ireland's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unwavering. Ireland will do all it can to support the humanitarian response both in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries.

As an Taoiseach announced last week, a €10 million Irish Aid Ukraine humanitarian package has been put together to enable organisations on the ground, including the UN and the Red Cross Movement, to provide life-saving assistance.

Some of this assistance is allocated to the UNHCR Regional Response Plan (RPP) for Ukraine, which is providing support to neighbouring European countries hosting Ukrainian refugees in the region. Separately, visa requirements for Ukrainian citizens wishing to travel to

Ireland have been lifted.

In addition, Ireland contributes to global funds and core funding to key agencies that are allocating funding to Ukraine, including WHO, OCHA, UNHCR, IFRC, ICRC and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). Ireland was the 9th largest donor to the CERF in 2021. Last week, the CERF allocated more than €17.8 million to Ukraine. This year we will increase our annual contribution to the CERF from €10m to €11.5m, as I announced at the CERF pledging conference in December.

My officials are coordinating closely with our EU partners and other countries in the region on the rapidly evolving situation in Ukraine and the related humanitarian response.

Foreign Conflicts

120. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he is taking to provide aid to other European countries that are taking in large numbers of Ukrainian refugees. [12161/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): I am extremely concerned by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Russia's unjustified and unprovoked attack is causing immense suffering for the people of Ukraine. Russia's war is illegal and immoral, and Ireland's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unwavering. Ireland will do all it can to support the humanitarian response both in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries.

As an Taoiseach announced last week, a €10 million Irish Aid Ukraine humanitarian package has been put together to enable organisations on the ground, including the UN and the Red Cross Movement, to provide life-saving assistance. Some of this assistance is allocated to the UNHCR Regional Response Plan (RPP) for Ukraine, which is providing support to neighbouring European countries hosting Ukrainian refugees in the region.

In addition, Ireland contributes to global funds and core funding to key agencies that allocate funding to Ukraine, including WHO, OCHA, UNHCR, IFRC, ICRC and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). Ireland was the 9th largest donor to the CERF in 2021. Last week, the CERF allocated more than €17.8 million to Ukraine. This year Ireland's annual contribution to the CERF increases from €10m to €11.5m, as I announced at the CERF pledging conference last December.

My officials are coordinating closely with our EU partners and other countries in the region on this rapidly evolving situation in Ukraine and on the humanitarian response.

Defence Forces

121. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to award a pandemic service medal to members of the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11925/22]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, a Joint Task Force was established to coordinate the Defence Forces contribution to the whole-of-Government Covid-19 response. A wide range of supports have since been provided by the Defence Forces to the HSE as well as to other Departments and Agencies, including support to the ongoing vaccination programme. Currently the focus remains on dealing with the

ongoing Recovery phase.

As the Deputy is aware, medals are awarded to members of the Defence Forces in line with Defence Force Regulation (DFR) A9, which sets out the qualifying criteria, delineates the procedures required for the awarding of Defence Forces Medals and sets out the various types of medal awards. Currently there are no plans to amend DFR A9 in relation to the introduction of new medals and the question of issuing a medal to Defence Forces personnel engaged in aid-to-the-civil-authority operations in conjunction with the Health Service Executive or in Operation FORTITUDE, the Defence Forces response to the Covid-19 pandemic, is not under consideration at this point in time.

Schools Building Projects

122. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education the cost of the recently purchased site for the relocation of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11915/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, following an extensive site identification, assessment and negotiation process, the Department reached an agreement in principle, subject to contract, for the acquisition of 8 acre site at Magee Barracks in Kildare Town to facilitate the relocation of the school to which the Deputy refers.

The acquisition process is at an advanced stage. Heads of Terms have been agreed with the Vendor and draft contracts have been exchanged.

Due to commercial sensitivities while conveyancing is ongoing and relating to site acquisitions generally, it is not possible to provide further information at this time.

Flexible Work Practices

123. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the interactions between her Department and education and training boards in relation to a hybrid working model for staff; the engagements that have taken place with staff in an education and training board (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11935/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Following recent changes to public health advice, a phased return to physical attendance in workplaces, for staff who had previously been working remotely, began with effect from Monday 24 January. How this will work in practice is a matter for each Civil and Public sector employer, including individual Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The approach is dependent on the individual circumstances of each workplace and the necessary business requirements.

However, there is a recognised need to focus on a longer-term approach to remote working which is consistent across the wider public sector. A process is therefore underway centrally, through engagement with relevant unions, to agree on a framework approach that can inform the development of organisational blended working policies which are tailored to meet the specific requirements of each public sector organisation. In due course, individual organisations will then develop their own blended working policies.

Flexible Work Practices

124. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the options available to an education and training board (details supplied) to avail of a hybrid working model; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11936/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Following recent changes to public health advice, a phased return to physical attendance in workplaces, for staff who had previously been working remotely, began with effect from Monday 24 January. How this will work in practice is a matter for each Civil and Public sector employer, including individual Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The approach is dependent on the individual circumstances of each workplace and the necessary business requirements.

However, there is a recognised need to focus on a longer-term approach to remote working which is consistent across the wider public sector. A process is therefore underway centrally, through engagement with relevant unions, to agree on a framework approach that can inform the development of organisational blended working policies which are tailored to meet the specific requirements of each public sector organisation. In due course, individual organisations will then develop their own blended working policies.

Residential Institutions

125. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education her views on the report issued to her by Caranua, entitled Evaluation of the impact of Caranua in providing funding supports to survivors of institutional abuse; the steps she plans to take on the back of this report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11807/22]

126. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education if an enhanced medical card identified as a need for survivors in the Caranua Report, entitled Evaluation of the impact of Caranua in providing funding supports to survivors of institutional abuse will be made available; if she is working to achieve this; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11808/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 125 and 126 together.

The report which the Deputy has referred to was submitted to me on 22 March 2021. This report highlighted, along with a number of other reports, the ongoing needs of survivors of institutional abuse and the lifelong difficulties they may experience. A survivor-led consultative forum was also established and has provided a very good insight into the areas where supports may be provided in the future.

This work is currently being considered by my Department with input from colleagues from other Departments. Significant resources are being devoted to progressing this which will feed into my consideration of proposals to Government in this context.

Question No. 126 answered with Question No. 125.

School Discipline

127. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education the processes that are in place in her Department to help and support children and young adults who are subject to expulsion from schools; if there is ongoing research or data on the social, economic and educational outcomes for young persons expelled from school; the efforts that are made to try and improve outcomes over extended timescales in view of the vulnerable status of many of these

children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11811/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 the Board of Management of a school must inform Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) of their intention to expel a student. TESS prioritise expulsion cases. Once the intention to expel notification is received by TESS, 20 school days must elapse before a decision can be made by the Board of Management of the school to expel the student. During this 20 school day period an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) will contact the parent(s) / guardian(s), or a student who is 18 years or older, to discuss the options available. These include appealing the decision to expel under Section 29 of the Education Act, 1998, applying to enrol in another school and home tuition which may be made available where the student meets the qualifying criteria.

In addition during this 20 school day period an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) will arrange a meeting in line with the provisions of Section 24 of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 and will discuss the students' ongoing education during the period they are without a school place. Following the 20 school day period, should the Board of Management of the school uphold the decision to expel the student an EWO will advise and assist the parent(s) / guardian(s), or student if aged 18 years or older, on the options available to them. Home tuition may be provided where the student meets the qualifying criteria. Tusla have produced an information leaflet for parents which provides information on the process:

TESS-Expulsion-from-school-info.pdf (tusla.ie)

My Department provides a range of resources through the DEIS programme, the Special Education Teacher model and the National Educational Psychological Service to ensure targeted supports are provided to those children who need it most. This has meant that Ireland's school completion rates at post-primary levels are among the highest in Europe. The results of the analysis of the first-time enrolments in secondary school in 2014 showed that, 97.6% went on to sit the Junior Certificate exams in 2017 or 2018 and 91.5% went on to sit the Leaving Certificate exams in 2019 or calculated grades 2020.

An analysis of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Retention Rates from 2001 to 2014 shows that the gap has narrowed between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. For the 2014 entry cohort DEIS retention rates to Junior Certificate is 96.3% compared to 97.9% in non-DEIS, a gap of 1.6 percentage points. The gap in retention to Leaving Cert rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools stood at 16.1 percentage points for the 2011 Cohort. The 2014 retention report results shows a retention gap of 8.6 percentage points for the 2014 cohort. For the 2014 entry cohort the retention rate to the Leaving Certificate of DEIS schools was 84.8% per cent, while for non-DEIS schools, it was 93.4%.

Special Educational Needs

128. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to a request by a school (details supplied) for an exceptional review of its SNA hours with the National Council for Special Education given that its SNA allocation of half of one SNA post is not sufficient to cope with its needs; the steps that are being taken to address the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11817/22]

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 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.

The NCSE has published the SNA allocations on its website 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.

My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly your correspondence has been forwarded to the NCSE for direct reply.

School Accommodation

129. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that a school (details supplied) is scheduled to open two classes for children with ASD and one special class but cannot do so due to uncertainty regarding its permanent building; if she has been in touch with the school regarding the matter; the steps that are being taken to address the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11818/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The permanent school building project for the school referred to by the Deputy has been assigned to the Department's Design & Build delivery programme. The Design & Build programme uses a professional external Project Manager to progress the project through the relevant stages of architectural planning, tender and construction.

A pre-planning meeting with the Planning Department of the local authority was held to discuss the design proposals for the permanent school building project. These discussions will inform the plans for developing the planning application documentation. The next key milestone for the project will be the submission of the planning application. It is not possible to provide a timeframe for the progression of the project to tender and construction stages until such time as the necessary statutory approvals have been secured.

Regarding the school's interim accommodation, the school will move from their current interim location to the educational campus at Notre Dame, Churchtown for September 2022. The school will have sufficient accommodation to cater for their mainstream requirements for September 2022 and 2023. As there will also be two other schools accommodated at this campus for September 2022, it will not be possible to provide accommodation for the establishment of an SEN class for September 2022.

My Department notes the school's willingness to accommodate an SEN class and will give further consideration to the establishment of an SEN class for September 2023, if the accommodation allows for same. The school /patron body have been fully informed of this situation. My Department will continue to address the interim accommodation requirements for the school and will keep the patron body and the school community updated as the project progresses.

Special Educational Needs

130. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 451 of 22 February 2022, if she will ensure that a school (details supplied) which had an allocation of two SNAs for four children during the 2021-2022 academic year will have its allocation increased for the next academic year to reflect the fact that there will be seven children in need of support from an SNA in the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11849/22]

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.

Very significant levels of financial provision are made to ensure that all children with special educational needs can be provided with an education appropriate to their needs.

The State currently spends approximately €2 Billion - almost a quarter - of its annual educational and training budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs.

Budget 2022 announced details of €9.2 billion in funding for education and includes an allocation of 1,165 SNAs to meet the care needs of pupils in 2022 and will also 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. This will bring the total number of SNAs to 19,169. This represents an increase of 81% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

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*.

Work is underway in relation to the SNA allocations for the 2022/23 school year. 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 Admissions

131. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education the future planning requirement for primary school places in Mullingar with specific reference to current demand versus the number of places that are available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11890/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, for school planning purposes, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, utilising data from a range of sources including child benefit data, departmental pupil databases, CSO statistics and information on recent and planned housing developments to forecast school place requirements at primary and post primary level.

Having considered the projected requirements in each school planning area, my Department then makes an assessment of the existing capacity within that particular area and its ability to meet any increased demand.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

My Department's most recent projections do not indicate significant increases in school place requirements at primary level in the Mullingar school planning area and it is expected that future demand can be catered for within the existing primary schools in the school planning area.

Schools Building Projects

132. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education the progress being made with the building of a school (details supplied); when it is scheduled to open; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11923/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The major construction project for the school referred to by the Deputy commenced on site in October 2020. Works are progressing satisfactorily on site and it is anticipated that the school will be ready for occupation in quarter four 2022.

Departmental Reports

133. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of the publication of the review on current and future provision of out of school education. [12149/22]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under Action 88 of the DEIS Plan my Department has undertaken a review of out-of-school education provision. This review was carried out by a Working Group chaired by my Department and comprised of representatives from stakeholders including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Tusla, Solas, Education and Training Boards Ireland and the National Educational Psychological Service.

This review has been informed through the use of questionnaires, submissions from stakeholders and a public consultation process, including consultation with students.

My Department is committed to a sustainable framework for out of school provision. I expect to soon be in a position to publish the report of the review and it is envisaged that the report will inform future policy in this area

Social Welfare Benefits

134. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way her Department determines the number of hours of care that need to be provided for a carer on a full-time basis under the rules for getting the carer's support grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11894/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department provides a comprehensive package of carers' income supports including Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on

these payments to carers in 2022 is estimated to exceed €1.5 billion.

The Carer's Support Grant is an annual payment of €1,850 for each care recipient paid in a single lump sum with no requirement to satisfy a means test and it is available to all carers providing full-time care to an older person or a person with a disability, regardless of their means or social insurance contributions. This grant is paid automatically to those in receipt of carer income supports. This grant is not available for any other group nor is there an equivalent payment for carers in any other country in Europe. Despite the extra financial demands due to the Covid-19 crisis, in Budget 2021 I increased the Carer's Support Grant by €150 to its current rate of €1,850. This is the highest rate since its introduction. The estimated spend on this grant in 2022 is over €262 million.

A primary qualifying condition for the Carer's Support Grant is that the applicant provides full-time care and attention to a person in need of such a level of care. The person being cared for must be so incapacitated as to require full-time care and attention and be likely to require this full-time care and attention for at least 12 months. The full-time care and attention requirement is contained in the respective legislative provisions of the Carer's schemes.

The main legislative provisions relating to the Carer's Support Grant are contained in Sections 224 to 226 of Part 5 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended, and associated regulations. Specifically, article 167 of Part 5 of the Social Welfare (Consolidated Claims, Payments and Control) Regulations 2007, S.I. No. 142 of 2007, provides for such matters as the circumstances in which a carer is to be regarded as continuing to provide full-time care and attention. These regulations set a minimum hours condition for which a carer can be regarded as providing full-time care and attention in relation to that person's eligibility for the Carer's Support Grant. They stipulate that a carer provides care for not less than 35 hours in a period of 7 consecutive days, and this care is provided on any 5 days, whether consecutive or not, within a period of 7 consecutive days.

While the carer's payments are premised on the provision of full-time care and attention by the carer they do provide good flexibility in terms of allowing carers to engage in training, education or work up to 18.5 hours per week. During this time, adequate provision must be made for the care of the relevant person. This was increased from 15 hours as part of Budget 2020 in response to requests from carer's organisations and carers themselves who found the 15 hours too restrictive. The 18.5 hour limitation represents a reasonable balance between meeting the requirement for providing full-time care for the care recipient and the needs of the carer to engage in employment or education, thereby supporting a carer's continued attachment to the workforce and broader social inclusion.

Any changes to the eligibility conditions for any of the statutory schemes operated by my Department, including the Carer's Support Grant, would require legislative change and would need to be addressed in an overall policy and budgetary context.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

135. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason that some pensioners in the age bracket 60 to 69 years of age who paid a class D stamp are not permitted to access the household benefits package until they are 70 years old; if she is considering changing the rules for this cohort; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11861/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Household Benefits

package (HHB) comprises the electricity or gas allowance, and the free television licence. The package is generally available to people living in the State aged 66 years or over who are in receipt of a social welfare type payment or who satisfy a means test. The package is also available to some people under the age of 66, who are in receipt of certain welfare type payments. My Department will spend approximately €273 million this year on HHB.

A person aged between 66 and 69 who is not receiving a qualifying payment from the Department such as the State Pension (Contributory) may still apply for the HHB package, subject to satisfying a means test. This includes a person who previously paid a class D stamp.

The means test involves calculating their appropriate weekly means limit. This limit is based on the current maximum rate of State pension (contributory) including any increases for age, living alone, and adult/child dependents plus €120. The weekly income limit is then compared to their weekly means as assessed in a means test. If their weekly means are less than or equal to their income limit, then they satisfy the means test and qualify for the household benefits package, subject to also satisfying all other qualifying conditions.

Any decision to change the qualifying criteria for HHB to allow persons such as civil and public servants who paid a class D stamp to automatically qualify for the package when they turn 66 would have wider budgetary consequences and would have to be considered in the context of overall budget negotiations.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

136. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding treatment benefit in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11892/22]

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 dependent 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 concerned and can confirm that he is entitled to dental benefit under the Department's Treatment Benefit scheme, which is based on PRSI contributions. An approval notification will issue to him in the coming days.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

137. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration has been given to including foster carers as an eligible group as part of the recent recommendations by the Pension Commission regarding establishing a State pension for long-time carers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11995/22]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” includes a commitment to examine options for a pension solution for carers, most of whom - particularly the carers of incapacitated children – are women. This Government acknowledges the important role that carers play and is fully committed to supporting them in that role.

Subject to the standard qualifying conditions for State Pension (Contributory) being satisfied, the State pension system currently gives significant recognition to those whose work history includes an extended period of time outside the paid workplace, often to raise families or in a full-time caring role, through the award of credits and/or the application of the Homemaker’s Scheme (under the Yearly Average method for payment calculation) and/or the application of HomeCaring Periods (under the Interim Total Contributions Approach (TCA)). Details of these are –

Credits – PRSI Credits are awarded to recipients of Carer’s Allowance (and Carer’s Benefit) where they have an underlying entitlement to credits and to workers who take unpaid Carer’s Leave from work.

Homemaker’s Scheme - The scheme is designed to help homemakers and carers qualify for State Pension (Contributory). It allows periods caring for children or people with a caring need to be disregarded (from 1994) and can have the effect of increasing the Yearly Average.

HomeCaring Periods – This Scheme makes it easier for a home carer to qualify for a higher rate of State Pension (Contributory). HomeCaring Periods may be awarded for each week not already covered by a paid or credited social insurance contribution.

Foster parents are entitled to the benefits of the Homemaker’s Scheme or HomeCaring Periods, on the same basis as other homemakers, and will qualify if the carer is in receipt of Child Benefit. If not in receipt of Child Benefit, they can still qualify for either scheme if the caring periods are confirmed by TUSLA (where caring is for a short period of time).

Since April 2019 all new State (Contributory) Pension applications are assessed under all possible rate calculation methods, including the Yearly Average and the Interim TCA, with the most beneficial rate paid to the pensioner. The elements which make up each method are set out in legislation.

If a person does not satisfy the conditionality to qualify for State Pension (Contributory), s/he may qualify for the means-tested State Pension (Non-Contributory), the maximum rate of which is over 95% that of the maximum rate of the State Pension (Contributory). Alternatively, if his/her spouse is a State pensioner with significant household means, his/her most beneficial payment may be an Increase for a Qualified Adult, based on his/her personal means, and amounting to up to 90% of a full contributory pension.

The Pensions Commission was established in November 2020 to examine the sustainability of the State Pension system and the Social Insurance Fund, in fulfilment of a Programme for Government commitment. It was an independent body comprised of knowledgeable and experienced academics, pension experts, members of civil society and representatives of workers and employers. The Commission’s Report has unambiguously established that the current State Pension system is not sustainable into the future and that changes are needed, and has set out a wide range of recommendations in this regard - including the full transition to a TCA model, phasing out of the Yearly Average approach and measures to enhance pension provision for long-term carers (over 20 years).

In the interests both of older people and of future generations of older people, the Govern-

ment intends to consider the comprehensive, far reaching recommendations in the Commission's Report very carefully and holistically. In this regard I intend to bring a recommended response and implementation plan to Government for its consideration by the end of March 2022.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Emergency Accommodation

138. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will report on the situation in relation to the provision of emergency accommodation for persons arising from domestic abuse at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11884/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-Agency issue coordinated by the Department of Justice. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, provides supports for victims of domestic violence primarily through funded NGO service providers.

I have been previously informed by Tusla that support for victims of DSGBV in County Offaly is available through the services of Offaly Domestic Violence Support Services (ODVSS), which is based in Tullamore and funded by Tusla. ODVSS received an allocation of approximately €247,000 in 2021 to support their important work. This amount is inclusive of additional funding to address service pressures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has allowed for this service to operate at weekends. In relation to a dedicated refuge, there is no purpose built refuge facility in County Offaly at present, but women can avail of emergency domestic violence accommodation in Counties Kildare and Westmeath, where there are two refuges supported by Tusla. I am aware, along with Tusla, of the gaps in emergency accommodation provision across the Midlands area, including County Offaly.

Tusla's recently published 'Review of the Provision of Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Violence' assesses the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation and has examined the current level of refuge provision, evidence of demand for services and unmet need, and analysis of proximity to refuge by local communities.

Government will be guided by the recommendations of the Review. I expect that the implementation process for the Review will identify priority areas where there is greatest urgency in achieving safe accommodation for victims of DSGBV.

Asylum Seekers

139. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will commit to resettle Ukrainian refugees with family members living in Ireland. [12158/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Firstly, I would like to assure you that I am deeply concerned by the ongoing crisis in the Ukraine.

We are monitoring the situation closely and my Department has begun planning to enable a quick and effective response to support Ukrainian nationals who come to Ireland seeking international protection.

I will liaise with the Cabinet and my EU colleagues to ensure an effective humanitarian response. My Department will work closely with key stakeholders, the European Commission, other EU Agencies and Member States in order to be prepared for a sudden increase in individuals seeking international protection in the EU and to support the EU's coordination approach in this regard.

I can confirm that accommodation will be made available by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) to those Ukrainian nationals who seek international protection in Ireland should they require it.

As the Deputy will be aware, it is not possible to estimate the number of Ukrainians likely to come to Ireland as the situation remains so volatile.

Ireland will not be found wanting in offering citizens of Ukraine the humanitarian support they will need at this devastating time.

Childcare Services

140. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children enrolled in school age children services nationally. [11805/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Data from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile, gathered in June 2021, estimated that there were 181,565 children enrolled in early learning and childcare services nationally. Of these children, approximately 18% were classified as school-going children.

This data is based on early learning and childcare services in contract to provide DCEDIY funding schemes only. In addition to this, there are up to 600 standalone school-age childcare services registered with Tusla providing services to school-going children but not in contract to provide DCEDIY schemes.

My Department continues to monitor developments in relation to early learning and childcare capacity.

In this context, data collection for the 2022 Annual Early Years Sector Profile will commence in April to provide an updated estimate of, inter alia, enrolments in DCEDIY funded services.

Asylum Seekers

141. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if a list of the migrant reception centres in Dublin 9 and 11 will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11814/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Deputy, I can confirm that there are two pre-reception centres in Dublin 9 - the Holiday Inn Express, Dublin Airport and the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Dublin Airport.

I can also confirm that there is one reception centre in Dublin 11, the National Reception Centre (NRC), Baleskin.

Legislative Programme

142. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will provide details of the legislative proposals to be introduced to provide for an extension of current entitlements for paid breastfeeding and lactation breaks for mothers under the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004; if he will provide a timeline of these proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12007/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I intend to bring forward legislative proposals in the coming weeks to extend the current entitlement to paid breastfeeding/lactation breaks for breastfeeding mothers in the workforce from 26 to 104 weeks under the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Acts in line with commitments in FIRST 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families and the National Strategy for Women and Girls.

The extension of breastfeeding breaks is an important support for mothers returning to the workforce after the birth of their child, and will facilitate the combination of breastfeeding and working in line with the WHO recommendation to continue breastfeeding, in combination with suitably nutritious and safe complementary foods, until children are two years old.

Asylum Seekers

143. **Deputy Brid Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the average waiting time for persons in emergency accommodation centres for asylum seekers to be issued with an appointment or invitation to the International Protection Office; the number of asylum seekers that are in emergency accommodation and Baleskin, Dublin who have not yet formally applied for protection nor received their temporary residency card; the steps that will be taken to ensure swift access to all material supports in line with Ireland’s international human rights obligations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12032/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The International Protection Office (IPO) collate the requested figures regarding the first two parts of your question. I suggest that you request this information from the IPO via my colleague, the Minister for Justice, namely:

a) the average time for persons in Emergency Accommodation to be issued an appointment with the IPO, and

b) the number of persons in Emergency Accommodation and the National Reception Centre who have not formally applied for international protection or received their temporary residency card.

I am happy to inform you of the protocols that have been put in place to protect international protection (IP) applicants and residents as well as enabling swift access to material supports.

The International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) works with relevant Departments and Agencies, including the Department of Education, the Department of Health and the Health Services Executive (HSE) to ensure that their systems can respond quickly to increased demand for services.

Social Services and material supports for all IP applicants are mainstreamed within state service provision. For example, new arrivals are provided with a medical card at the earliest op-

portunity and IP Applicants access health services through the same referral pathways as Irish citizens, including referral to disability and mental health services. DECDIY IPAS staff and the onsite NGOs are providing residents with direct support to assist them with their application for a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) through a dedicated Department of Social Protection (DSP) support team in order to speed up the process for allocation of a PPSN.

Furthermore, all residents have access to an independent support helpline operated by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and funded by the Department. The JRS helpline contact number is 1800 929 008 or you can email: info@jrs.ie. If a resident wishes, a complaint made through this service may be passed, in confidence, to IPAS for investigation and resolution. The JRS have also launched their app for IP applicants. welcomejrs.ie/ is available in multiple languages and seeks to assist IP applicants, service-users and customers in navigating the protection process and accessing mainstream services.

Official Engagements

144. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of meetings he has had with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission concerning the Birth Information and Tracing Bill 2022. [12155/22]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I have not met the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) specifically on the Birth Information and Tracing Bill though I listened carefully to their submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee as part of the pre-legislative scrutiny process. I am satisfied that, where possible, matters raised by IHREC will be provided for in the legislation or through the implementation process.

I note that IHREC specifically raised the issue of adequate resources being in place upon enactment and, as I have confirmed previously, significant extra resources have been provided to both Tusla and the Adoption Authority to ensure readiness for implementation. IHREC also submitted views on the importance of providing timelines for processing applications and this matter is currently under active consideration by my Department.

I also noted the IHREC position on identity rights for children under 16 and I confirm my commitment to advancing work on provisions for children under 16 separate to the Birth Information and Tracing Bill 2022. As the Deputy will know the impetus for this legislation is the recognised, urgent need to provide access to adult adoptees, particularly in recognition that many of these have waited decades.

Apprenticeship Programmes

145. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprenticeship applications that are outstanding; the number of apprenticeship applications in the construction sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11855/22]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): In 2021, a record 8,607 new apprentices were registered in the apprenticeship system. This is an increase of over 38% in comparison to 2020. 6,955 registrations were in craft apprenticeships, and largely in the construction sector. There were 1,652 registrations on the newer, post-2016 programmes. At the end of 2021, the overall apprentice population was

24,212.

Regarding the deputy's question on the number of apprenticeship applications that are outstanding; specifically in construction the attached table shows yearly registrations to date in construction apprenticeships as well as current apprentice waiting lists for off the job training as of February 2022.

My Departments officials have requested information from SOLAS on all other apprenticeships besides Construction. It will be sent on to the deputy as soon as it is available.

Construction Trades by Population and Registrations (ytd) and Waiting Lists up to end of February 2022

Trade	Live Population	Registrations in 2022 (ytd)	Waiting for Phase 2	Waiting for Phase 4	Waiting for Phase 6	Comments
Brick and Stonelaying	281	9	92		5	
Cabinet Making	1					
Carpentry and Joinery	2262	102	825	3		
Painting and Decorating	116	3	30		3	
Plastering	96	3	8	5		
Plumbing	2617	126	951	95	5	
Stonecutting and Stonemasonry	20		5			
Wood Manufacturing and Finishing	365	19	130	22		
Geo Driller	27		20			Post 2016 Apprenticeship
Scaffolding	38	1	33			Post 2016 Apprenticeship
Electrical	8700	371	3471	70	7	Included from Electrical

Student Accommodation

146. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the case of a person (details supplied) will be examined. [11904/22]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am very conscious of the challenges faced by students seeking to access affordable student accommodation.

Fundamentally the underlying issue is one of supply and there is a need to increase the supply of all types of accommodation including student accommodation. That is why Government launched Housing for All led by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage which sets out a series of actions which will be delivered to address the housing crisis backed by a transformative budget of €20 billion.

However, the Government has taken measures to address both upfront payments and rent increases. Rent increases in student accommodation are capped under the Rent Pressure Zones (RPZ). Recent legislation restricts the amount that students can be required to pay up front for their accommodation, ending the practice whereby students were required to pay a lump sum

up front each term. For tenancies created on or after 9 August 2021, the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Act 2021 restricts the total amount that anyone is required to pay to a landlord by way of a deposit or an advance rent payment to secure a tenancy to no more than the equivalent of 2 months' rent (i.e. any deposit cannot exceed 1 month's rent and any advance rent payment cannot exceed 1 month's rent). Previously, families were required to pay a lump sum each term (often in the range of €2,500 to €3,500). The Act also limits termination notice periods in respect of student-specific accommodation, so that no more than 28 days' notice is required to be given by students.

My Department is continuing to work closely with Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on these issues. We are also working with Higher Education Institutions to address these matters too.

Third Level Fees

147. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the increased distance criteria for SUSI and income thresholds will be in place for the forthcoming applications in the 2022-2023 academic year. [11905/22]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The Student Grant Scheme, administered by SUSI, provides grant assistance to students pursuing an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means. It assists over 70,000 students annually to access third level education.

The eligibility criteria for student grants are reviewed annually by the Department and approved by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. All proposals made in relation to education expenditure, including student grants, are considered in the context of the annual Budget.

As part of Budget 2022, I have secured an additional €15m to enhance the existing financial supports under the Student Grant Scheme for implementation in 2022.

For the academic year 2022/23 this will mean:-

- An increase to all student grant maintenance payments, including the special rate of grant, of €200 per year which will benefit all students entitled to receive a maintenance Grant.

- The income thresholds to qualify for the standard rates of student grant have been increased by €1,000.

- The qualifying distance criterion for students to qualify for the non-adjacent rate of grant has been reduced from 45km to 30km, effective from the start of the 2022/23 academic year.

I have prioritised these changes for the 2022/23 academic year and they will benefit thousands of students, building on the improvements that have already been made for postgraduate students through this year's student grant scheme. These improvements to the student grant scheme have been a priority for me since taking up my Ministerial appointment.

Student Visas

148. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Justice the average processing time for

student visas, both short stay C visas and long stay D visas; the actions she will take to ensure that visas are processed in a timely manner; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11822/22]

149. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Justice the measures that are in place to ensure the timely delivery of student visas for student applicants travelling from Nigeria to pursue periods of study in third-level colleges. [11823/22]

150. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Justice the way that the processing time of visa applications can be expedited to ensure competitive markets are tapped into by third-level colleges in view of investment into student recruitment drives to countries such as Nigeria; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11824/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 148 to 150, inclusive, together.

Decisions regarding the granting or refusal of study visas are made in a number of Visa Offices overseas, in the Immigration Service Visa Office in Dublin, and at certain Embassies of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade which process certain visa applications under delegated sanction from my Department. Applications from Nigerian residents are normally processed in Abuja.

The processing times for visa decisions are published on the Visa pages of each Visa Office and Embassy website. As of 22nd February 2022 the Dublin Visa Office was processing study visa applications received in Dublin on 2 November 2021. As of 28 February 2022 the Abuja Visa Office was processing study visa applications received in Abuja on 21 December 2021.

The business target for processing study visas is eight weeks. However, the processing time at each office and location worldwide is determined by a number of factors such as the volume and complexity of applications, whether investigation is required or not, individual circumstances, peak application periods, seasonal factors, and the resources available. While every effort is made to process applications as quickly as possible, processing times inevitably vary as a result.

My Department also maintains ongoing contact with representatives of third level institutions in the State on matters relating to international students and their entry and residence requirements.

The Deputy can be assured that every effort is made to keep processing times to a minimum, and a number of measures have been put in place to deal with the increased demand for visas to come to Ireland. This has included the assignment of additional staff to deal with applications, and more generally the streamlining of visa processes where possible. The position in this regard is being kept under review.

The central concern in deciding on visa applications, as with all visa services worldwide, is to strike an appropriate balance between protecting the country's vital national interests by maintaining an effective immigration regime while at the same time facilitating travel for those who meet the criteria. Each visa application is therefore decided on its own merits taking all factors into account.

Question No. 149 answered with Question No. 148.

Question No. 150 answered with Question No. 148.

International Relations

151. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice the position regarding a refusal of mutual assistance request (details supplied); if the decision can be appealed and the process made available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11893/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): International requests for mutual legal assistance in criminal matters are dealt with on a confidential basis and therefore it would not appropriate to comment in detail on individual cases. Such requests are dealt with in accordance with the Criminal Justice (Mutual Assistance) Act 2008, as amended.

The incoming request concerned was refused, following legal advices, having regard to section 3(1)(b) of the 2008 Act.

The legal basis for the refusal was communicated to the requesting state and the legal representatives of the individual that was the subject of the mutual assistance request.

There is no provision to appeal a refusal under the Act.

Citizenship Applications

152. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice the status of a citizenship application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11907/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The application of the person referred is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether they meet the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision when processing is complete.

The Citizenship Division of the Immigration Service of my Department has requested documents from the solicitor acting on behalf of the person referred to by the Deputy. On receipt of this documentation the application will be processed further.

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.

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, which is the highest level 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.

Work Permits

153. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice the options open to a person from Brazil who has been living in Ireland since they were three years of age whose parents did not register them when they reached sixteen years of age and who is seeking a stamp 4 to enable them to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11908/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person that the Deputy is referring to should contact their local immigration office who will advise on the necessary steps to regularise their permission to be in the State. The Deputy hasn't provided any specific information in relation to the person so it is not possible to give any substantive guidance.

Once a person has reached the age of 16 years of age, they are required to register with their local immigration office. First time registrations outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) through the Garda Station network and securing of those appointments with GNIB are a matter for An Garda Síochána. The Registration Office of my Department registers permissions for those residing in the Dublin area.

Minors under the age of 18 are exempt from paying the registration fee.

Information on how register for the first time is available on my Department's website here:

www.irishimmigration.ie/registering-your-immigration-permission/how-to-register-your-immigration-permission-for-the-first-time/.

Antisocial Behaviour

154. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the initiatives that are available for communities to install CCTV to combat antisocial behaviour. [11981/22]

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

The rollout of community CCTV schemes across the country has benefitted many communities, helping people to feel safer in their local areas. It is a priority for my Department to ensure that community groups continue to be supported in their valued contributions to their local CCTV schemes whilst ensuring sufficient, proportionate oversight of data protection statutory considerations.

Since 2017, my Department has administered a grant aid scheme supporting groups wishing to establish a community-based CCTV system in their area. Eligible groups, including community groups and local authorities nationwide, can apply for grant aid of up to 60% of the total capital cost of a proposed CCTV system, up to a maximum total of €40,000.

The CCTV grant scheme was extended in 2019 to cover not only new CCTV systems but to also provide funding for the extension or upgrade of existing CCTV systems which are incomplete or obsolete. Applicants may now also seek a once-off grant of up to €5,000 for minor maintenance costs. Support and assistance for those running CCTV schemes is available by

2 March 2022

contacting: fundsadmin-comm-based-cctv@justice.ie

Community-based CCTV is governed by Section 38(3)(c) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 and the Garda Síochána (CCTV) Order 2006 (SI 289 of 2006). This legal framework requires that any proposed community CCTV scheme must:

- be approved by the local Joint Policing Committee,
- have the prior support of the relevant local authority, which must also act as data controller, and
- have the authorisation of the Garda Commissioner.

This is the legal basis for all community CCTV schemes, regardless of how they are funded. These key legal requirements have not changed since 2006.

The Deputy will be aware, the Data Protection Commission have carried out an in-depth, independent review of community CCTV schemes. My Department is incorporating amendments into the Garda Síochána (Digital Recordings) Bill to address these findings.

The General Scheme of the Garda Síochána (Digital Recording) Bill 2021 was approved by the Government and published on the 29th April 2021. The General Scheme was sent to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel for formal drafting, and drafting is continuing. The General Scheme was also submitted to the Oireachtas Committee on Justice for pre-legislative scrutiny. The Committee's report was received in December 2021 and is currently being examined by my officials. It is my intention to publish the Bill by the end of March 2022 and to complete its passage through the Oireachtas later this year.

This Bill will provide statutory underpinning for Garda overt recording, which will include CCTV authorised in local communities by the Garda Commissioner. It is planned to have a further review of the terms and conditions of the current scheme to bring it into line with the proposals in this new legislation and in keeping with the commitment in the Programme for Government.

Once this review is completed, appropriate guidance will issue to An Garda Síochána on the control and supervision of CCTV systems. It is expected the Bill will be enacted in 2022. The legislation, once enacted, will replace Section 38 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005.

I am informed that €1m funding has been allocated in the Garda vote for the CCTV Scheme for 2022.

If the Deputy is aware of groups wishing to avail of the grant aid scheme, further details are available to download from the Department's website and support and guidance is available to help interested groups through a dedicated email address.

Asylum Seekers

155. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice the average waiting time for persons in emergency accommodation centres for asylum seekers to be issued with an appointment or invitation to the International Protection Office; the number of asylum seekers that are in emergency accommodation and Baleskin, Dublin who have not yet formally applied for protection nor received their temporary residency card; the steps that will be taken to ensure swift access to all material supports in line with Ireland's international human rights obligations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12031/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The overall objective of the Department is to have recommendations made on international protection applications as soon as possible. This ensures that those who are found to be in need of protection from the State can receive it quickly and begin rebuilding their lives here with a sense of safety and security.

At all times, people seeking international protection in Ireland can do so without needing an appointment at the office of the International Protection Office (IPO) in Dublin.

People attending the IPO are not required to have a pre-arranged appointment or invitation to do so, and the IPO office can be attended anytime between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm Monday to Friday.

As a result, it is not accurate to suggest that there is any waiting time for such appointments.

Anyone wishing to apply for international protection status is strongly encouraged to attend at the IPO office as early as possible, at which time they are granted temporary residence cards, and the processing of their applications can begin.

Officials of the Department of Justice have also been liaising with their counterparts in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs to ensure that the above information is given to all people availing of the accommodation provided by that Department for those seeking international protection.

Responsibility for the accommodation system and material supports for international protection applicants are a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Citizenship Applications

156. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date regarding an application of citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12147/22]

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.

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.

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, which is the highest level 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.

Foreign Conflicts

157. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will put in place humanitarian admission provisions for persons from Ukraine fleeing the current violence. [12159/22]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): On Friday 25 February, I announced the immediate lifting of visa requirements between Ukraine and Ireland. This will streamline and support the swift exit of both the Ukrainian family members of Irish citizens, and the family members of people from Ukraine who are resident in Ireland.

It will also apply as an emergency measure to all Ukrainians travelling to Ireland and is a humanitarian response to the rapidly evolving situation in Ukraine.

People who are considering leaving Ukraine and travelling to Ireland may for the coming period do so without a visa if they judge it safe to travel. Those who travel to Ireland without a visa during this period will then have 90 days after arrival to regularise their position.

I will attend a further meeting of the EU JHA Council meeting on Thursday where the proposal for activating the Temporary Directive will be discussed. This is an emergency provision designed to quickly and humanely respond to the mass displacement of Ukrainian people by Russian aggression and this is expected to be a more appropriate mechanism in this instance than a humanitarian programme.

Ireland has acted swiftly and compassionately to demonstrate our support and solidarity with the Ukrainian people and my Department continues to work closely with colleagues across Government to ensure a coordinated national response.

Any measures introduced will be kept under review and the Government will continue to work with our EU colleagues on any further EU-wide measures that might assist those fleeing Ukraine.

Health Services

158. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health his plans in relation to the restoration of services at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11804/22]

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 Service Executive

159. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 134 of 9 February 2022, if he will provide details of the clinical specialities that are represented on the Therapeutics Implementation Working Group; the details of the clinical specialities that are represented on the COVID-19 Therapeutics Implementation Preparedness Programme Clinical Advisory Group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11810/22]

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

160. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Clare will be facilitated with an urgent appointment for a PET scan at St. James's Hospital, Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11819/22]

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

161. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if the contact details of a new clinic will be provided to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11820/22]

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.

Abortion Services

162. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to retain the option to access termination of pregnancy services by telephone or video conference consultation as recommended as an option by international organisations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11825/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As part of the Government's ongoing efforts to protect public health and limit the spread of Covid-19, the Department of Health and the HSE worked together in 2020 to put arrangements in place to allow termination of pregnancy services in early pregnancy to be provided remotely.

For the duration of the Covid-19 public health emergency, where the need for social distancing, reducing personal contacts and reducing the burden on medical practitioners are paramount, it became possible for a woman to access a termination under section 12 of the Health

(Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 (i.e., before 12 weeks) from her medical practitioner by telephone or video conference consultation.

There is ongoing engagement between the Department of Health and the HSE to monitor service provision, facilitate the smooth-running of the service and resolve any issues that may arise. However, as restrictions are beginning to ease, the Department is currently reviewing whether remote consultation as part of a blended approach to termination of pregnancy care should be continued post the COVID-19 public health emergency period. A decision is expected in the coming weeks.

Health Strategies

163. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the scheme for free contraception for 17 to 25 year olds; the timeframe for commencement of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11826/22]

164. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if a needs assessment has been carried out in respect of the number of medical professionals who are certified to fit and remove long-acting reversible contraceptives in line with the expected demand when the programme for free contraceptives commences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11827/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 163 and 164 together.

The Programme for Government commits to providing free contraception for women, starting with the 17-25 age cohort; roll-out is scheduled to commence in August 2022.

The scheme will provide for:

1. The cost of prescription contraception;
2. The cost of a minimum 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.

The capacity within the health system to fit and remove LARCs was examined by the Working Group on Contraception; the Report is available on the Department's website. At time of publication in 2019, there were over 1,000 GPs holding LARC certification and that there was scope for enabling practitioners to develop their skills further by promoting further integration between the hospital and community sector and developing local centres of expertise in sexual and reproductive health services.

As part of the Budget 2022 allocation, funds are being made available for additional training capacity with respect to certification of medical professionals to fit and remove LARCs. The HSE is currently working on preparing to roll out these additional training supports.

Question No. 164 answered with Question No. 163.

Mental Health Services

165. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on his engagements on the whole-of-Government youth mental health pathfinder unit; the governance, legal complexities and issues that have been raised in relation to the proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11401/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The proposal to establish a cross-governmental youth mental health Pathfinder unit, with participation from the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, received Ministerial approval during the previous Government. Its establishment is a priority in the current Programme for Government.

The proposal is to formalise a new model for collaborative working within Government and place a Pathfinder unit on a statutory footing, through section 12 of the Public Service Management Act 1997. As this section has not been used before, there has been considerable engagement between the Department of Health and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on how this model could be provided for in a statutory instrument. Amongst other things, it involves identifying suitable functions to be delegated from Ministers to an individual, ensuring those functions do not overlap with existing functions of officials in participating Departments, ensuring that reporting and governance arrangements are provided for at an appropriate frequency and ensuring that accounting arrangements for moneys provided from participating Departments to the Head of Unit are robust. These arrangements need to be fully developed and agreed by participating Departments, incorporated into a statutory instrument in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General, and submitted to the Department of Public and Expenditure and Reform for further consideration.

The realignment of Departmental functions in the education sector, specifically the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, has necessitated some further consideration of the initial proposal and makeup of the Pathfinder unit.

The demands on both the Department of Health and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform during the pandemic have presented challenges to progressing the proposals. Nonetheless, the Department of Health has continued to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to develop a robust implementation option.

The implementation of the Pathfinder project is a priority for me and I will continue to keep this matter under close review in the context of progressing Sharing the Vision.

Medical Cards

166. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the reason that a person (details supplied) who was in possession of a full medical card which expired during Covid was only reissued with a general practitioner visit card despite the fact that their medical needs did not change over the past year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11841/22]

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 Cards

167. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the number of medical cards that have expired during the Covid-19 restrictions; the number that have been reissued during the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11846/22]

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 Cards

168. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that persons who were in possession of full medical cards during Covid-19 restrictions whose cards had expired during the restrictions were reissued with a general practitioner visit card only; the rationale for this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11847/22]

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

169. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health the criteria for health and social care professionals registration for physiotherapists who achieve their qualification within the European Union but outside Ireland; the options that are available for such qualified persons in the event that CORU insist upon further Irish hospital placements being carried out before registration is approved specifically when such placements are not available within the Irish hospital system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11856/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): CORU is Ireland's multi-profession health and social care regulator. Its role is to protect the public by regulating the health and social care professions designated under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (as amended).

Applicants seeking to register with the Physiotherapists Registration Board may present qualifications awarded either in or outside the State. Those qualifications awarded outside the State are required to be assessed under the process provided in Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications. The Directive provides for the assessment of an applicant's formal training and post-qualification professional experience.

This assessment, undertaken on a case by case basis by academic and professional asses-

sors, seeks to determine the alignment between an applicant's qualification and the standards of proficiency required for the practice of that profession in Ireland. If deficiencies in the qualification are identified, an applicant's post-qualification training and professional work experience will be considered. If deficits remain, an applicant will be offered a choice between compensation measures: a period of adaptation and an aptitude test. The Physiotherapists Registration Board will provide the applicant with the details of the deficits and determine the form that the period of adaptation or aptitude test should take.

An aptitude test is provided by a university under contract to CORU for the provision of such tailored assessments. In respect of a period of adaptation, CORU does not have any role in requiring any service provider to provide a period of adaptation placements. Detailed guidance is provided to applicants on the form that the period of adaptation is required to take. The choice to pursue a period of adaptation or an aptitude test rests with the applicant.

I hope that this information is of assistance.

Nursing Homes

170. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health the progress being made with respect to the reform of the fair deal scheme to remove disincentives to selling or renting homes that have been vacated as a result of their owners being in nursing homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11857/22]

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

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

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

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

Health Services

171. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on physiotherapy waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11867/22]

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

172. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on occupational therapy waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11868/22]

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

173. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on speech and language therapy waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11869/22]

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

174. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on podiatry waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11870/22]

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

175. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on ophthalmology waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11871/22]

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

176. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on

audiology waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11872/22]

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

177. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on dietetics waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11873/22]

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

178. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on psychology waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11874/22]

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

179. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on CAMHS waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11875/22]

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.

Mental Health Services

180. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on counselling in primary care waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11876/22]

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.

Nursing Homes

181. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on nursing homes support scheme waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest avail-

able data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11877/22]

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

182. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on home support for funding and for service provision waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11878/22]

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.

Dental Services

183. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on dentistry waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11879/22]

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

184. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on orthodontics waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11880/22]

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

Disabilities Assessments

185. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on assessment of need waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11881/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Disabilities Assessments

186. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on fur-

ther diagnostic assessment waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11882/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Health Services

187. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on diagnostic waiting lists by CHO at the end of 2021 and at the latest available data point broken down age and by the length of waiting time by age in tabular form. [11883/22]

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

188. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will outline the position regarding matters (details supplied) in relation to the management and staffing arrangements for the Covid-19 HSE mass-vaccination centres during 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11885/22]

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

189. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1415 of 19 January 2022, if there are further updates in relation to the matter. [11886/22]

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

190. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health when the shortage of dedicated residential places in the catchment area in County Kerry will be resolved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11888/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

191. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health when the Covid bonus will be paid to frontline workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11889/22]

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 this month 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 (eg: nursing homes and hospices that are private, public, section 39, voluntary etc.) 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 (including payment dates), terms and conditions that apply. It is important that this measure is applied fairly as intended and I welcome the work that is ongoing to ensure this is so.

Though noting the above work is still ongoing, it is envisaged that the process for paying eligible public sector healthcare workers will commence this month. For eligible healthcare workers in private sector nursing homes and hospices, noting the additional complexities involved, it is envisaged the process will commence in the second quarter of this year.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

192. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the progress that has been made with the tender for an audiology testing facility for Tuam primary care centre; when the testing facility will be operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11895/22]

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.

Legislative Reviews

193. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a full breakdown of the areas being covered in the research being carried out by a person (details supplied) as part of the three year review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11896/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 was signed into law on 20 December 2018 and commenced on 1 January 2019. Under section 7 of the Act, a review of the operation of the Act must be initiated

within three years of the commencement of the Act.

As I stated previously, the review comprises a three-part approach to appraise the operation of the Act, with strands focusing on service users, service providers and a public consultation. Independent research commissioned to inform the service user and service provider strands will form key elements of the review.

Research to inform the service user strand is being carried out by Dr Catherine Conlon, Associate Professor, Trinity College, who is progressing a large qualitative study to analyse unplanned pregnancy and abortion care. The study, which was commissioned by the HSE's Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme in September 2019, will generate an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women who have accessed abortion care services since the commencement of the Act.

Independent research is also being commissioned on service providers' views on the operation of the legislation. The tender application process for this research closed in January 2022 and the applications are currently being evaluated.

As the Deputy may be aware, I have appointed Ms. Marie O'Shea B.L. as the independent Chair to lead the second phase of the review of the operation of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. The independent Chair will assess the extent to which the objectives of the Act have been achieved, analysing in that regard the findings of the three strands of research to consider the effectiveness and operation of the Act. The Chair may also consult with stakeholders to gather additional information on the operation of the legislation and draw on the findings of other relevant peer-reviewed research to inform her report.

Medical Aids and Appliances

194. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he will include supplementary allowance payments to persons who are amputees who work and have medical cards granted on a discretionary basis to assist in the purchase of prosthetic limbs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11897/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE provides a wide range of medical and surgical aids and appliances, including prosthetics, free of charge to eligible persons following assessment by a relevant health professional. These are provided through community services known as Community Funded Schemes and play a key role in assisting and supporting people to maintain everyday functioning, and to remain living in their homes and local community.

Applications within Community Health Organisations (CHOs) are assessed by the local Resource Allocation Group and a determination is made regarding approval based on clinical priority and the funding available. At times, due to the demand for resources exceeding the available capacity, waiting lists may apply for some categories of items but CHOs undertake a range of initiatives to ensure optimum use of resources.

Amputees, whose amputation arose from either a traumatic or elective event, usually have their primary prosthesis fitted at the hospital where the surgery was undertaken. Subsequent prostheses are provided to eligible clients through the Community Funded Schemes. Rehabilitation services are provided by the National Rehabilitation Hospital (NRH) primarily at their site in Dun Laoghaire and augmented by a number of satellite clinics that they operate throughout the country. There are also a number of smaller services operated at regional level that provide assessment and fitting clinics along with prostheses at a local level. Counselling services

for amputees are available through the POLAR service provided by the NRH and through the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

A HSE Primary Care led National Service Improvement Programme has the aim of improving the equity of access, value for money, and functional processes of the Community Funded Schemes through the establishment of national guidelines for the provision of medical and surgical aids and appliances. While this work was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as the situation involving the pandemic improves, this Programme will gather pace.

Health Services

195. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider the issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to the need to improve services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11899/22]

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

196. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health the status of the case of a person (details supplied); and when the person concerned can expect an appointment with the National Rehabilitation Hospital, Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin. [11906/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Tests

197. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will make low-cost PCR tests widely available in view of the decision to wind down testing centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11911/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): From 28 February 2022, testing for SARS-Cov-2 will progressively move from extensive case finding and tracing of infection to reduce transmission, towards a focus on mitigation of the severe impacts of COVID-19 for those most vulnerable to the severe effects of the disease and those with risk factors for severe disease who may benefit from specific interventions. This decision is facilitated by the high level of vaccine-induced and naturally acquired population immunity in Ireland which is mitigating against the worst impacts of infection.

It is important to point out that anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 or other viral respiratory tract infection should immediately self-isolate and continue to do so until 48 hours after symptoms have substantially or fully resolved.

Testing for public health purposes is now advised for those most vulnerable to the effects of the disease. This includes those aged 55 years and older who have not received a booster vaccination, those with a high-risk medical condition, who are immunocompromised, who live in the same household as a person who is immunocompromised, who provide care or support for

a person they know to be immunocompromised and those who are pregnant. Antigen testing will be recommended for use by asymptomatic healthcare workers identified as close contacts, and to facilitate social welfare claims related to a person's absence from work. The HSE will continue to maintain access to swabbing for PCR tests at test centres around the country during this transition phase. There continues to be no cost for access to tests provided for public health purposes by the HSE.

Individuals who are concerned about an underlying condition and/or their level of risk in relation to COVID-19 should continue to seek advice from their GP or treating clinician.

The approach to public health management of the pandemic, including changes to testing, tracing and surveillance management will remain under continuing review under the guidance of the Office of the Chief Medical Officer and will be subject to the evolving epidemiological situation, the impact of the disease on healthcare utilisation and outcomes, the vaccination status of the population, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) guidance and other international evidence and guidance.

Health Services

198. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if there has been any progress on the refurbishment of Monasterevin daycare centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11924/22]

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

199. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists participating in the dental treatment services scheme per CHO region per year from inception; the number of dentists that have withdrawn from the scheme since 2017; the number of new dental treatment services applications currently being processed to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11933/22]

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.

Departmental Correspondence

200. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health if he will advise on matters raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11977/22]

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.

Disease Management

201. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will respond to issues raised in correspondence by an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11994/22]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I understand that my colleague Mary Butler, Minister of State for Mental Health and Older People, recently met with officials in the Department of Health and the Huntington's Disease Association of Ireland to discuss matters concerning people with Huntington's Disease. Officials in my department have made enquiries with the HSE on foot of correspondence from Huntington's Disease Association Ireland and a response will issue in due course.

Medicinal Products

202. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the reimbursement of the gene therapy treatment luxturna for persons suffering with inherited retinal diseases (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11996/22]

203. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will correspond with the HSE Executive Management Team to request it to reconsider the decision regarding the reimbursement of the gene therapy treatment luxturna (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11997/22]

204. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consultations have taken place in order to improve the cost effectiveness of the gene therapy treatment luxturna (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11998/22]

205. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the reimbursement of the gene therapy treatment luxturna which complements national policy objectives as set out in the Programme for Government to update the Rare Diseases Plan and the promotion of research particularly clinical trials which are key to improving the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of rare diseases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12000/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 202 to 205, inclusive, together.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licenced indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

In making a relevant reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost-effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

The HSE has advised that on 23 September 2019 an application was received for the reimbursement of Voretigene neparvovec (Luxturna) for the treatment of adult and paediatric patients with vision loss due to inherited retinal dystrophy caused by confirmed biallelic RPE65 mutations and who have sufficient viable retinal cells.

On 29 October 2019, following the completion by the NCPE of a rapid review, the HSE commissioned a full pharmacoeconomic assessment with respect to this indication.

On 3 April 2020, the NCPE received the applicant's submission for this assessment. On 18 September 2020, the NCPE completed its assessment and recommended that Voretigene neparvovec not be considered for reimbursement unless cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

The HSE engaged in commercial negotiations with the applicant company in November 2020.

The HSE Drugs Group is the national committee which the HSE has in place to make recommendations on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. The membership of the HSE Drugs Group includes public interest members and clinicians.

The HSE Drugs Group considered Voretigene neparvovec at its February 2021 meeting, and requested Patient and Clinician Engagement input via the Rare Diseases Technology Review Committee (RDTRC) to assist the group in making its recommendation to the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT) regarding reimbursement of Voretigene neparvovec.

The HSE has advised that, on 23 March 2021, the RDTRC held a meeting at which Voretigene neparvovec was the main agenda point.

The Committee met on 26 August and concluded its patient and clinician engagement with respect to Voretigene neparvovec. The Committee submitted a statement in December regarding this review for the Drugs Group's consideration.

The Drugs Group had specifically requested a Prescribing Guideline to inform their deliberations. This guideline is currently under development. The Drugs Group will review the output of the RDTRC and the Prescribing Guideline with a view to making a recommendation at the earliest opportunity to the HSE EMT.

The HSE EMT is the decision-making body for the reimbursement of medicines under the Health Act 2013 and it will, following receipt of the outcome of the HSE Drugs Group's deliberations, make the decision on whether Voretigene neparvovec will be reimbursed.

Question No. 203 answered with Question No. 202.

Question No. 204 answered with Question No. 202.

Question No. 205 answered with Question No. 202.

General Practitioner Services

206. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the inability of persons to access antenatal and postnatal general practitioner care if they opt for a home birth despite their entitlement under the maternity and infant care scheme; the steps he is taking to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12001/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Maternity and Infant Care Scheme provides an agreed programme of care to expectant mothers ordinarily resident in Ireland. This combined medical service is provided by the family GP and a hospital obstetrician and includes a schedule of alternating examinations at the GP's practice and a maternity unit/hospital, as well as two post-natal visits to the GP. Private medical indemnity providers currently do not provide indemnity cover to GPs for services under the Maternity and Infant Care Scheme if a patient is opting for a home birth.

The State indemnifies enterprises on behalf of the Minister for Health under the Clinical Indemnity Scheme (CIS) when national policy confirms that this should be provided. This includes Community Midwives who have an SLA with the HSE for the provision of home births. In the case of GPs, they are private practitioners and to date services provided by them and by GP practice nurses are not covered by the CIS. Instead, as private practitioners, GPs receive professional indemnity from private medical indemnity providers. As this is an arrangement between two private parties, the medical indemnity cover provided is a matter for GPs and their private insurers.

The National Maternity Strategy aims to ensure that appropriate care pathways are in place in order that mothers, babies and families get the right care, at the right time, by the right team and in the right place. The Strategy makes it clear that women should be offered a choice regarding their preferred pathway of care, in line with their clinical needs and best practice, including in regard to the birth setting. Further discussions need to take place with relevant parties to agree national policy on the role of GPs in relation to home births, in the context of the National Maternity Strategy.

Dental Services

207. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the status of the dental treatment services scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12005/22]

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 ar-

rangements under the Scheme.

My officials met with the Irish Dental Association in December to address both of these issues. A further round of discussions with the IDA is to take place on 2 March.

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.

Mental Health Services

208. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant positions to be filled in the mental health services in CHO8; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12006/22]

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

209. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the length of time a patient who has been diagnosed must wait on the waiting list before they can apply for the treatment abroad scheme when a patient has been diagnosed with a condition and requires an operation; and if can they avail of the scheme if they are on a medical card. [12008/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The EU Cross Border Directive (CBD) provides rules for the reimbursement to patients of the cost of receiving treatment abroad, where the patient would be entitled to such treatment in their home Member State, and supplements the rights that patients already have at EU level. The CBD enables persons resident in the State to access and be reimbursed for healthcare in another Member State by the HSE, provided such healthcare is publicly available within Ireland. The patient is responsible for paying the provider of the treatment and claiming a reimbursement. The CBD scheme is not part of the Medical Card scheme.

There is no minimum period of time required on a waiting list to avail of the CBD.

Medicinal Products

210. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the shortage of hormone replacement therapy medication specifically hormone patches for women going through menopause; the steps he will take to ensure an increase in supply in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12009/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Unfortunately, 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. 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 is aware of the current challenges regarding the intermittent supply of some hormone replacement therapies (HRT), notably transdermal patches. The HPRA has had regular and ongoing engagement with suppliers in this regard. The companies that place the products on the market have indicated that the current supply difficulties are due to a significantly increased demand for these medicines in Ireland in recent years. To illustrate, the supply of one range of HRT products, Estradot, has increased by between 77% and 117% for, for the three most-used strengths, compared to 2020. In addition, based on demand in recent months, the company expects a similar increase in the demand for all strengths during 2022. This would mean that the usage of Estradot in Ireland would be approximately 4.5-7.5 times higher in 2022 (depending on the strength) compared to 2019.

The suppliers have confirmed that they have increased supply of HRT patches to Ireland during 2022 in response to this increased demand. In the case of one brand (Evorel/Evorel Conti), the supply of HRT patches has resumed. For another brand (Estradot), some strengths are available currently and, based on manufacturing availability, the re-supply of the full range is expected to be in July. In the interim, the companies have indicated that they are working to find solutions to the immediate supply issues.

The current supply situation has arisen due to significant increases in demand for HRT medicines and is not linked to regulatory matters. However, the HPRA continues to review available options within our regulatory remit to facilitate increased supply where at all possible. In particular, the HPRA has advised the companies that we are open to providing accelerated regulatory approval to supply a product originally intended for other markets if available. We are awaiting further information from the companies in this regard.

The HPRA publishes a medicinal product shortages list on its website, with the reason for the shortage, the expected dates for the return of supply and in some cases, such as HRT shortages, the HSE's clinical guidance on the management of patient treatment in response to medicine shortages. The information is made available to assist healthcare professionals in managing medicine shortages when they do arise and reduce their impact on patients. The information relating to shortages on the HPRA website is dynamic and changes depending on the current information the HPRA has to hand, including removal from the list when a shortage has been resolved.

The HPRA will continue to liaise with suppliers of HRT medicines over the coming weeks with a view to securing updates and commitments regarding the restoration of normal supplies for patients as soon as possible.

Health Services

211. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients per CHO on neurology waiting lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12010/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

The 2022 waiting list action plan, which was launched on the 26th of February, allocates €350 million to the HSE and NTPF to reduce waiting lists by 18% this year which will bring the number of people waiting to their lowest point in five years

Projections for 2022 show that over 1.5 million patients will be added to active waiting lists this year. Many people stayed away from the health service during the pandemic and, as these people come forward for treatment it will place huge additional demand on health services.

Under this plan the Department HSE and NTPF will deliver urgent additional capacity to treat 1.7 million people as well as investing in longer term reforms to bring sustained reductions in waiting lists.

The plan focuses on 15 high volume inpatient day case procedures, including cataracts and hip and knee replacements, so that every person waiting over 6 months for one of these procedures, and who is clinically ready will receive an offer of treatment.

The plan 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 of Health 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. The Task Force 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 the Department of Health. 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.

I understand that the Deputy has indicated he is satisfied to receive the information requested by Hospital Group rather than CHO. The attached document outlines the IPDC and Outpatient Neurology Waiting List by Hospital Group.

[Neurology waiting lists]

Health Services Staff

212. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health his plans in relation to in-

creasing the number of neurology nurse specialists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12011/22]

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.

Departmental Priorities

213. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeframe for the establishment of the national diabetes registry; the engagements that have taken place in relation to eHealth and the registry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12012/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In September 2019 Sláintecare Integration funding was allocated to the HSE to design and procure a National Diabetes Registry demonstrator product and develop a full specification plan for a National Diabetes Registry. It was intended that the registry would be in place by 2021. However, the project was paused as it was dependent on the input and expertise of key HSE staff who were redeployed onto urgent on-going COVID-19 work.

The development of a National Diabetes Registry remains a priority, and following substantial increases in investment in eHealth, is now being considered as part of a wider review of Ireland’s health information strategy. The diabetes registry, along with other disease-specific registries, will operate as “virtual” registries and will use existing health and social care records to enable the monitoring of the incidence and prevalence of disease in Ireland.

Virtual registries will identify people with specific diseases in data extracted from systems such as hospital inpatient and outpatient records, laboratory tests, and pharmaceutical data collections. Each “virtual” registry will be allowed to require and request the provision of relevant information from health and social care organisations, and anyone who is providing a health or social care service to ensure each registry will have complete coverage of its area of relevance.

Virtual registries will allow for the development of disease-specific registries in a way that maintains comprehensive and up-to-date information that will meet the needs of many different stakeholders.

Departmental Priorities

214. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeframe for the establishment of eHealth virtual disease-specific registries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12013/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department is currently preparing a Memo for Government for approval-in-principal of a Health Information Bill, to improve the care people receive, their outcomes and the well-being of the population by ensuring high quality information is available to the public, health and social care professional, researchers and policymakers.

Included in the design of this Bill is a provision to enable the operation of disease-specific “virtual registries”, where information on disease diagnoses and treatment from healthcare providers are efficiently collated, combined and quality-checked from administrative records to create a database akin to an active registry for each disease. This will greatly improve the po-

tential to monitor rare-disease prevalence in Ireland

Disease Management

215. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will establish a multi-disciplinary team to provide the necessary specialist support for sufferers of Huntington's disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12017/22]

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.

Disease Management

216. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will establish a working group to focus on Huntington's disease under the joint auspices of the National Dementia Office and the integrated care programme within the next six months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12018/22]

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.

Medical Aids and Appliances

217. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with diabetes who are approved for devices (details supplied) through the long-term illness scheme; and the number who are over 21 years of age in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form [12024/22]

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

218. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with diabetes who are approved for devices (details supplied) through the long-term illness scheme; and the number who are over 21 years of age in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form. [12025/22]

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

219. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the number of clinical referrals received for devices (details supplied) for persons with diabetes through the aids and appliances

arrangements; the number of referrals that were received for persons over 21 years of age; the number of referrals approved; the number of referrals approved for persons over 21 years of age; the number of referrals that were rejected; and the number of referrals that were rejected for persons over 21 years of age in each of the years 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021, in tabular form [12026/22]

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

220. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the steps that can be taken to assist a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12029/22]

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

221. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if an issue in relation to dental work for medical card holders will be addressed as in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12033/22]

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

222. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12034/22]

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 Tests

223. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider continuing local access to free PCR tests for persons who require a negative result to access services in a public hospital after 28 February 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12036/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE will continue to provide access to PCR testing according to the prevailing public health guidance in place at any particular time and swabbing centres around the country remain open for this purpose. There is no charge for a Sars-Cov-2 test provided by the HSE for public health purposes and no plans to introduce such any such charge.

Individuals who are concerned about an underlying condition and/or their level of risk in relation to COVID-19 should continue to seek advice from their GP or treating clinician. In the example provided by the Deputy, the individual should also discuss the options available with

the hospital concerned, or their local GP.

Hospital Facilities

224. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Health when University Hospital Limerick will become a DAFNE-accredited diabetes centre; and the number of whole-time equivalent posts (details supplied) currently in place in the adult outpatient diabetes clinic in each of the hospitals in the University of Limerick hospital group, in tabular form. [12151/22]

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

225. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with diabetes who were funded for a device (details supplied) by the long-term illness scheme or the primary care reimbursement service; and the number of such persons that were over 21 years of age in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form. [12152/22]

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

226. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Health the number of funding applications received by the long-term illness scheme or the primary care reimbursement service for the FreeStyle Libre flash glucose monitoring system; the number of applications received for persons over 21 years of age; the number of applications approved; the number of applications approved for persons over 21 years of age; the number of applications that were rejected; and the number of applications that were rejected for persons over 21 years of age in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form. [12153/22]

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 Admissions

227. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Health the number of hospital admissions that occurred through University of Limerick hospital group accident and emergency or the acute medical assessment units due to severe hypoglycaemia in each of the years 2017 to 2021 in age ranges (details supplied) in tabular form. [12154/22]

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

228. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health when University Hospital Limerick will become a DAFNE-accredited diabetes centre; the number of full-time consultant endocrinologists, diabetes specialist dieticians and clinical diabetes nurse specialists currently in the adult outpatient diabetes clinic in each hospital in the hospital group; and the details of same. [12162/22]

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

229. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with diabetes who were funded for devices (details supplied) through the long-term illness scheme or the primary care reimbursement service; and the details of same. [12163/22]

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

230. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with diabetes who were funded for devices (details supplied) by the long-term illness scheme or the primary care reimbursement service; and the number of those persons that were over 21 years of age in each of the years 2018 to 2021, in tabular form. [12164/22]

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.

General Practitioner Services

231. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the stress and worry patients in small towns and villages in rural Ireland are experiencing due to the closure of many general practitioner practices (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12165/22]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is aware of the workforce issues currently facing general practice, including the limited access to GP services in certain areas. We are working to ensure patients across the country continue to have access to GP services and that general practice is sustainable in all areas into the future.

Recent developments in relation to general practice, in particular the 2019 Agreement on Contractual Reform and Service Development, have helped to re-establish general practice in Ireland as an attractive career choice. The additional investment, which will amount to €210 million annually once the Agreement is fully implemented, provides for an increase in capitation fees, improved maternity and paternity arrangements as well as enhanced supports for rural practices. In addition, targeted funding of €2 million will also be set aside to provide additional support to practices in deprived urban areas.

Several efforts to increase the number of practising GPs have been undertaken in recent years. The number of entrants to GP training has increased from 120 in 2009 to 233 in 2021,

with further increases planned. Changes have been made to the entry provisions to the GMS scheme to facilitate more flexible/shared GMS contracts, and to the retirement provisions for GPs under the GMS scheme. An enhanced supports package for rural GP practices was also introduced.

Importantly, the 2019 GP Agreement includes a commitment to undertake a strategic review of GP services within the lifetime of the Agreement, to examine how best to ensure the provision of GP services in Ireland for the future. Work on the review is to commence this year. The review will examine the broad range of issues affecting general practice, and will set out measures necessary to deliver a sustainable service into the future.

Forestry Sector

232. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the agricultural schemes under which a landowner can plant up to one hectare of land without obtaining a forestry licence. [11806/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): All new forests proposed for planting 0.1 hectare (ha) or greater requires a licence and is regulated by the Forestry Act 2014. There is no scheme which allows the planting of one hectare without a licence.

The Government is progressing through the houses of the Oireactas a legislative change which will allow the planting of up to one hectare of native woodland without a licence when planted as part of a scheme.

The terms and conditions of this scheme will be drafted if the legislation is successfully passed by the Oireactas. My Department will consult with stakeholders before any such scheme is drafted and will be screened for a Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment.

My Department provides a range of grants and premiums for the planting of new forests 0.1 ha or greater under the Afforestation Scheme. All sites currently 0.1 ha or greater in size require a licence. The legislative change if passed will streamline the planting a small areas of native woodland.

Research and Development

233. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department plans to continue funding the duck weed carbon sequestration research that is ongoing at Mount Lucas, Edenderry, County Offaly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11813/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department's €240 million European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme 2014-2020 is the principal source of public funding for the sustainable development of our fisheries, aquaculture and seafood processing sectors and is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union under the EMFF Regulation.

I understand that BIM awarded grants under the EMFF Knowledge Gateway Scheme to two projects concerning duckweed (*lemna minor* and *lemna gibba*) at the Bord na Mona owned aquaculture facility at Mount Lucas in Co. Offaly. Both projects were undertaken by Univer-

sity College Cork. The AQUASUS project assessed the suitability of duckweed to remediate aquaculture wastewater and was completed in 2019. The AquaOpti project looked at developing duckweed biomass for protein extraction. This project is still ongoing and will conclude in April 2022.

The Knowledge Gateway Scheme is presently closed, as the EMFF nears its conclusion with almost all funds committed. My Department's new Seafood Development Programme under the successor to the EMFF, the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund 2021-2027, is being developed and I expect to submit it to the Commission later this year for its adoption. That Programme may include a similar support scheme for innovation in aquaculture, subject to available funds and funding priorities and it would be a matter for interested parties to apply under the scheme for funding at that time. I am advised that BIM is presently assisting a commercial duckweed company and the Technological University of the Shannon with prospective duckweed work at the Mount Lucas site.

Departmental Programmes

234. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when it can be expected that he will announce an operational programme for the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund 2021-2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11980/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department's €240 million European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Programme 2014-2020 is the principal source of public funding for the sustainable development of our fisheries, aquaculture and seafood processing sectors and is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union. It has been in place since 2015 and is nearing its end, with almost all funds committed. Its successor, the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund 2021-2027 (EMFAF), was established by regulation on 7 July 2021.

Ireland's Seafood Development Programme under the new EMFAF is being developed by my Department at present and I expect to submit it to the Commission later this year for its adoption. Work is progressing well, informed by a number of engagements with stakeholders to date. There will be a final public consultation on the draft Programme and SEA Environmental Report in the second half of this year, ensuring further opportunity for stakeholders to input their views on the Programme's content and priorities for funding.

Harbours and Piers

235. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will continue to provide Departmental funding for coastal infrastructure to ensure that those harbours and slipways that are ineligible for Brexit Adjustment Reserve funding receive maintenance and investment funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12014/22]

236. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide funding for coastal infrastructure to ensure that harbours and slipways that are not shovel-ready can engage in the necessary planning and design works that may render them eligible for the Brexit Adjustment Reserve funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12015/22]

237. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will

establish a framework and method of working with local authorities to ensure investment needs for smaller piers and harbours can be addressed via the Brexit Adjustment Reserve, Departmental or other funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12016/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 235 to 237, inclusive, together.

On 25th January 2022, I launched a new €35m scheme exclusively for the rejuvenation of local authority owned public piers and harbours, the Brexit Adjustment Reserve Local Authority Marine Infrastructure Scheme 2022-2023. The Scheme flows from the Seafood Taskforce Report which addresses the impacts arising on the seafood sector from the EU/UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. The Scheme is a unique initiative designed to support job creation and protection by distributing Brexit Adjustment Reserve funds to enhance, upgrade, modernise and develop Ireland's publicly owned coastal and marine infrastructure to facilitate diversification of economic opportunities. The Scheme will run throughout 2022 and 2023.

The Seafood Taskforce recommended a focus on small-scale 'shovel-ready' projects to give immediate construction stimulus to the coastal communities. Projects associated with harbour development or marine leisure works that are clearly associated with shore-based infrastructure such as quays, piers, slipways, and floating pontoons and certain other associated equipment will be considered eligible under the Scheme.

Following the announcement of the Scheme, my Department hosted an online information session for local authorities and since then has issued all relevant documentation, including application forms, to coastal local authorities. The applications for the first tranche of projects are invited by March 8th. There will be other opportunities during the year and during 2023 for further applications. My Department will identify projects for approval having regard to the purpose and criteria of the Scheme and to the priority attached to each project by the relevant local authority.

The responsibility for the development and maintenance of local authority owned piers, harbours and slipways rests with each local authority in the first instance. I am also mindful that the primary governance role for local authorities rests with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and any wider funding issues for local authorities should be addressed to that Minister.

This Scheme represents record funding for our coastal communities and is an unprecedented opportunity for us to shape the future of our coastal communities. Brexit has and will continue to affect our seafood sector in a unique way compared to other industries. It is important that this Scheme helps to deliver safe, accessible, lasting infrastructure and support economic diversification right around our coastline.

Question No. 236 answered with Question No. 235.

Question No. 237 answered with Question No. 235.

Weather Events

238. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of compensation for a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12035/22]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The

Department monitors the impact of weather on agriculture and farming both nationally and regionally on an ongoing basis and is aware of the areas potentially affected in Wexford. I understand that the damage caused to farm land in the south Wexford region as a result of the flooding that was experienced on Christmas Day has been localised.

As the Deputy is aware, the flooding created significant local challenging conditions, in particular, to local road networks, land and farms adjacent to rivers. However, water levels receded considerably and quickly since the flooding occurred on Christmas Day lessening the effect on crops.

There are a number of specific supports that my Department operates for the tillage sector, these include TAMS investment support for tillage farms, whilst almost 19% or almost €1.5m of support under the Straw Incorporation Scheme was expended in Wexford.

My Department is monitoring the situation closely.

Departmental Schemes

239. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to review the CLÁR areas in County Cavan to include an area (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11851/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The CLÁR programme provides funding under a number of different measures for small-scale infrastructural projects in designated rural areas. I recently launched this years programme with a total budget of €7 million, an increase of €1.5 million on the previous year.

The measures being funded under CLÁR 2022 are:

Measure 1: Developing Community Facilities & Amenities

Measure 2: Mobility, Cancer Care and Community First Responders Transport

Measure 3: Our Islands

There are designated CLÁR areas in all counties with the exception of Dublin, Kildare and Wexford. The areas originally designated for CLÁR were selected in 2001 based on the level of population decline in each area between 1926 and 1996. The Cooley Peninsula was also included on the basis of the serious difficulties caused in that area by Foot and Mouth disease at that time. The average population loss in the original CLÁR areas over the period 1926 to 1996 was 50%.

In 2006, an analysis of the 2002 Census data was carried out by the NIRSA Institute (National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis) at Maynooth University and the programme was extended to include areas with an average population loss of 35% between 1926 and 2002.

I understand that the area located in Co. Cavan which is the subject of the Deputy's question does not meet these criteria and is not a designated CLÁR area.

A review of CLÁR areas nationally was undertaken in 2021 using the 2016 Census of Population data. The review considered whether any other factors should be taken into account in designating areas for eligibility under CLÁR in the future, and the impact of population changes since the last review was undertaken. The details of the review will need to be considered in detail by my Department before any decisions are made on amending the areas which

are designated as CLÁR.

Departmental Schemes

240. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of an application (details supplied); if she will ensure that this group is supported; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11852/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Town and Village Renewal Scheme aims to assist with the rejuvenation of rural towns and villages throughout Ireland, making them more attractive places to live, work and visit.

In line with the commitment in Our Rural Future, the 2021 scheme prioritised the renovation of derelict and vacant buildings in our town centres, with a view to bringing these buildings back into use and enhancing town centre living. I also increased the maximum grant available under the Scheme last year to €500,000 to permit projects of additional scale to be funded.

On Friday 25 February last, I announced almost €18.5 million in funding for 99 projects across Ireland under the 2021 Town and Village Renewal scheme. This included funding of over €1 million in funding for 6 projects in Cavan, details of which are below

All applications were assessed as part of a competitive process. I can confirm that funding was sought in respect of the application referred to by the Deputy but it was not selected for funding on this occasion.

I will shortly be launching the Town and Village Renewal Scheme for 2022 should they wish to reapply.

Town	Project Description	Funding
Cavan Town	Comprehensive upgrade and enhancement of Con Smith Park, a large urban amenity in Cavan Town, Co Cavan.	€499,249.34
Bailieborough	Streetscape enhancement to include façade and gable wall painting and derelict shop front repairs and replacements.	€213,289
Swanlinbar	Streetscape enhancement to include façade painting, murals, window graphics for the front of derelict buildings, purchase of wheelchair accessible fishing pods along the river, and installation of iron sculptures.	€90,000
Kilnaleck	To upgrade and repurpose parts of the Realtóg Centre and the Kilnaleck Community Centre to a Remote Working and Digital Hub.	€89,402
Redhills	Village enhancement to include: façade painting of 25 buildings; upgrade of seven (7) benches; connecting services to the village green.	€87,812
Virginia	Streetscape enhancement through the commissioning of four murals depicting culturally important subjects from the life of Virginia.	€41,435
Total		€1,021,187

Broadband Infrastructure

241. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the roll-out of broadband connection points; the number that have been connected to date by county; the number planned to be connected; the component shortages that may impact the delivery of broadband connection points; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11926/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Public Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are among the first premises for delivery under the National Broadband Plan. They are publicly accessible sites that serve areas without reliable high-speed broadband, including isolated communities in rural areas and on many of our off-shore islands. Sites are provided with a temporary wireless high-speed broadband connection which they make available for onsite community use, including for remote work and study.

There are currently 250 BCPs live and these are all listed on the online map available at www.myconnectedcommunity.ie. Approximately 50 more BCPs are planned for installation this year. The full listing by local authority area is set out in the table below.

It should be noted that there will always be a ‘lag’ between the sites shown live on the map and the sites that are, in practice, live and operational. This is due to the need for my officials to verify that the service at each BCP is as users would expect and that the work has been completed to the requisite high standard. Sites do not become billable until this verification process has been completed. The map is updated periodically to include recently commissioned sites.

With regard to component shortages, the layer 3 8-port switches used at many BCPs have proven difficult to source due to the global semi-conductor shortage. Standard switches are the point at which the initial connectivity comes into the premises from the wireless link (dish) outside the premises and is then redirected to the WiFi access points for the public to use. Layer 3 switches allow for wired and networked equipment such as desktop PCs, printers, smart screens, remote access door controls and onsite managed firewalls, as well as the standard WiFi solution. As such, they are essential to the future-proofing of BCPs, adding another level of amenity beyond the original scope of the project.

Due to the same issues impacting on delivery of the switches, the enterprise-grade WiFi access points used at BCPs have also been difficult to source.

We have been informed that the remaining WiFi access points and switches will be delivered by the end of this month and that Vodafone, the retail service provider contracted by my department to support the BCP network, will work to deploy these as quickly as possible.

[Broadband details]

Broadband Infrastructure

242. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the additional development activities connected to broadband connection points namely the pilot projects trialling new activities and services; the details of pilot projects; the locations of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11927/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Public Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) provide supports for the whole community, remote workers, students, local community groups and schools. They can offer suites of digital skills training courses, arts and culture activities including musical instruction and access to national cultural resources and a range of eHealth and telemedicine programmes.

My Department in partnership with a number of BCP committees and local authority Broadband Officers began trialling new activities and services in the BCPs in 2021. These trials serve two purposes: to establish what may work well at BCPs and to encourage those managing BCPs to develop innovative uses for the high-speed connectivity that has been provided.

Trial projects may be available to all operational BCPs, or may be limited to certain selected sites. Where there is a limit to the number of sites that may take part in a trial, these sites are selected on a first come, first served basis, or on the basis of a needs and suitability assessment. The intention is that on foot of these pilot projects successful projects can be made available to all BCPs nationwide.

There are currently 18 pilot projects live under the following four headings:

eHealth - dedicated e-health rooms, planned or operational, in counties Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo and Monaghan, including Tory and Clare islands.

These eHealth facilities will complement the ‘HSE Attend Anywhere’ initiative and be suitable for a range of virtual consultations with consultants and other medical professionals in major hospitals without the need for long distance travel.

Training & Education – Digital Skills Training is provided for free by a number of partners including Microsoft, Kinia, CoderDojo and OurKidsCode.

These training programmes are aimed at senior citizens, primary and secondary school age children, and adults with an interest in updating their digital skills. The courses are intended to promote basic digital literacy, upskilling and engagement with STEM subjects during childhood.

Several of these trials have already begun and are showing great potential. The full range of digital skills programmes are scheduled for roll out from the second quarter of 2022.

Arts & Culture – there are currently four significant projects underway in 2022:

- The IFI Oscars Collection of short films due to launch exclusively to all BCPs on the 24th March (TBC). This Collection has been curated and will be delivered by the Irish Film Institute.

- Na Píobairí Uilleann (NPU) is offering free Uilleann Pipes classes for all ages. Participants are invited to “Try the pipes” before committing to a course of instruction. Classes are delivered online from BCPs. NPU also has a loan program for those unable to afford to buy pipes.

- Access Cinema Film Clubs - to set up film clubs on 5 remote island locations providing support for 1 film screening per month for 5 months and provide ongoing support to the film club. The sites chosen are Clare Island (Mayo), Achill Island (Mayo), Valentia Island (Kerry), Bere Island (Cork) and either Lettermullen Island or Inis Oirr (Galway).

- RESILIENCE Music Event arranged and recorded by Meath Co Co available exclusively to all BCPs nationwide.

Remote Working – training for hub managers is being provided by the Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen. To support remote workers, Grow Remote will provide training and mentoring to groups so that they can establish Grow Remote chapters in their area. These chapters provide a network of peers and access to the national body which advocates for and provides advice to remote workers in Ireland. Grow Remote, the Ludgate Hub and officials at my department are providing ongoing support to many BCPs as they develop working facilities and services. Support is also provided via the Connected Hubs platform, of which several BCs are members.

There is no charge to the BCPs or the public for participation in any of the trial activities. Furthermore, grants of €1,000 are available from my department for devices and equipment to support training and education activities and €10,000 has been made available to each local authority to procure additional activities or training, either under the headings above or under

another heading as proposed by the Broadband Officer.

In addition to the above, BCPs were beneficiaries of the 2021 Connected Hubs fund under which almost €9M was made available to hub and BCPs to increase remote work capacity. I have also recently announced the 2022 Connected Hubs funding call. Once again, BCPs are eligible to apply for funding up to €75,000 and I would encourage all BCPs to consider making an application. I have made €5M available for the 2022 fund.

Details of events at BCPs can be found at myconnectedcommunity.ie/events/. This function on the BCP network's website will be kept updated over the coming months with additional details as new events are added.

Broadband Infrastructure

243. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the contact details for each local authority broadband officer. [11929/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Broadband officers (BBO) are based in local authorities across the country. The role of the BBO is to provide a local point of contact for telecoms operators and the public regarding telecoms issues, and the posts are funded by my Department and local authorities.

BBOs play a key role in working with National Broadband Ireland, as well as with initiatives introduced by my Department such as the Broadband Connection Points, the Digital Innovation Programme, and the National Remote Working Hub network.

A full list of broadband officers and their contact details can be found at www.gov.ie/pdf/121991/?page=null.

Official Engagements

244. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the details of any engagement her Department has had with the relevant stakeholders in relation to the proposal for the development of a centre (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11989/22]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department of Rural and Community Development are owners of the lands referred to by the Deputy. The Department have been considering options for the future of the site following a consultation process which took place in 2017.

One proposal supported by local submissions was for the location of a coastguard station on the site. The Department agreed to allow the Coastguard to develop their proposals. As a result, the OPW on behalf of the Coastguard have developed a draft plan of what is proposed on part of the site. The OPW are now moving ahead with this proposal including contacting the local authority in relation to acquiring planning permission.

The Department were also approached by a development group requesting permission to explore the possibility of another development on part of the site. I have met with this group on two occasions as have officials from my Department.

The Department granted permission for the group's consultants to undertake investigative

works at the site to explore the potential for the proposal. However, there are a number of substantial issues which arise for consideration before the Department will be in a position to make any further decisions regarding the proposal including the completion of the planning process for the coastguard station.