

## Written Answers.

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

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*Questions Nos 1 to 15, inclusive, answered orally.*

*Questions Nos. 16 to 18, inclusive, resubmitted.*

*Questions Nos. 19 to 25, inclusive, answered orally.*

### Capital Expenditure Programme

26. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the Capital Plan 2016-2021, specifically with regard to metro north, the DART extension and DART underground; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13997/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The Government's Capital Plan allocates just over €3.6 billion for investment in public transport for the period 2016 to 2022. Over this period, the level of annual funding for public transport investment will increase to more than €800m by 2022. This will facilitate a significant upgrade to the public transport system, particularly in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), so that it has the capacity to meet growing demand.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the development of public transport infrastructure in the GDA. The NTA's Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035 provides a framework for the planning and delivery of transport infrastructure and services over the next two decades.

The GDA Strategy proposes implementation of the new Metro North project. It also proposes implementation of the DART Expansion Programme including construction of the DART Underground Tunnel. The Government decided in September 2015 that the original proposal for the tunnel should be redesigned and work is underway on that at present.

The NTA is currently in the process of preparing an Implementation Plan for the delivery of the GDA strategy for the period 2017-2022. Key to implementation over this period is the capital funding that will be available for investment in public transport infrastructure over the period.

The Capital Plan includes funding for the new Metro North project to enable construction of the link to commence in 2021 with a view to delivery by 2026/2027. Due to continuing constraints on funding, not all of the elements of the DART Expansion Programme can be progressed during the lifetime of the Capital Plan. Funding has been allocated for the extension of the DART to Balbriggan and for work on the redesign of the tunnel.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government is embarking on a Mid-Term Review of the Capital Plan, which will take stock of progress and provide the Government with an opportunity to consider the scope for increased levels of investment, including in the transport sector, taking economic growth and fiscal progress into account. I will be making the case for increased capital funding for public transport in that context.

### **Light Rail Projects Status**

27. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of metro north and the projected timeline for delivery of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13996/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The Programme for Government includes a commitment to proceed with the new Metro North project and as I have outlined in my reply to the previous question, funding is provided in the Capital Plan to facilitate construction of the link commencing in 2021 with a view to delivery by 2026/2027.

The decision to proceed with new Metro North followed consideration of the Fingal/North Dublin Transport Study and the National Transport Authority's (NTA) recommendations on the study, which identified the light-rail link as the optimum long term public transport solution on the Swords/airport/city centre corridor. It is expected that the service will offer capacity for 9,900 passengers per hour per direction with the potential to expand services in the future if demand requires.

The NTA and Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) have commenced preparatory work on the planning and design of new Metro North and a dedicated project Steering Group has been established which is meeting on a regular basis. The NTA, in collaboration with TII, is undertaking an option analysis and selection study of possible metro alignments and station locations. Arising from this work a final route and station configuration will be established. It is my understanding that the NTA and TII expect that this process will be complete by the end of 2017, after which a public consultation process will be undertaken in 2018.

*Questions Nos. 28 to 31, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Rail Network Safety**

32. **Deputy Brendan Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the rolling out of staffless train stations in towns such as Portarlinton and Portlaoise on the grounds of safety and ensuring the personal customer service for older persons and persons with disabilities remains central to Irish Rail's operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14240/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Staffing levels at train stations are an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and not issues in which I have any statutory function. I have however been informed that there are no plans to make either Portarlinton or Portlaoise stations unmanned.

The broader issue of staffing levels at stations generally is under review by the Company, primarily in response to changes in customer behaviour.

This changed customer behaviour is evidenced by the fact that the just 17% of ticket sales are now made through station ticket offices, with the vast majority made online or through self-

service modes in stations.

The Company is seeking to enhance customer service to ensure that:

- More Intercity services are staffed to ensure customer service and assistance is available including for those with disabilities and older customers.
- Station resources are more focused on direct customer service in the station area, rather than confined to the ticket office area, with a mix of staffed and self-service stations as appropriate to demand.
- Customers who require assistance can avail of this more easily.

Specifically for customers requiring assistance, Iarnród Éireann plans to confirm new pilot arrangements for mobility-impaired customers shortly, which will dramatically reduce the current advance notification period and ensure a better response when customers requiring assistance cannot give notice. These new arrangements are being designed following extensive customer research, and liaison with the Company's Disability Users Group.

The Company has communicated with all station managers around its network on its plans, and is now working with employees to design local implementation plans.

It is intended that the rollout of enhanced on-board staffing will commence this summer, with station changes to be phased over time.

As well as liaising with employees and their trade unions, I understand that the company also held an open information day on these plans 7th March last to which all Oireachtas members were invited.

### **Transport Policy**

33. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which a comprehensive, integrated road passenger transport plan is being developed, with particular reference to the need to ensure an adequate level of passenger transport throughout the country in all areas without exception, incorporating school transport utilising both the private and public sectors in a way which facilitates opportunities for both and particularly the highest possible degree of quality service to the customer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14226/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy may be aware, the Programme for Government contains a commitment to reviewing public transport policy so as to ensure services are sustainable into the future and are meeting the needs of a modern economy. My Department's Statement of Strategy 2016-2019 lists the publication of a new Public Transport Policy Statement as a key indicator of progress. My Department plans to undertake this work later this year.

The Statement will take cognisance of relevant initiatives in several other areas of public policy on which the Government is already deeply engaged including the preparation of a new National Planning Framework (NPF), the Action Plan for Rural Development and a National Mitigation Plan and Climate Adaption Paper for the transport sector. The new NPF in particular will influence how national transport objectives are achieved in our regions, cities, towns and rural areas. In terms of funding, we must get the balance right in relation to regional and rural transport services and the associated investment. I will be ensuring that a strong case in this

regard is made as part of the Mid-Term Review of the Government's Capital Plan in 2017.

The precise nature and detailed content of the new Public Transport Policy Statement has yet to be scoped out. However, I am clear as to whom public transport should be about - the ordinary citizen - regardless of who the service is provided by. Placing the citizen at the heart of our policy will allow us to realise the true potential of public transport, allow it to play its full role in promoting social progress and economic prosperity and ensure that a quality service is provided to the customer.

### **Road Safety Authority Reports**

34. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will report on the Road Safety Authority, RSA, survey which showed that 7,651 drivers have multiple concurrent disqualifications on their licences and are continuing to flout the law by driving; the follow-up taking place to ensure that these drivers are taken off the roads, in view of the fact that broader figures estimate that up to 24,000 drivers fail to hand up their licences on disqualification in court; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14000/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The Deputy may wish to note that I responded in relation to this RSA survey on 24 January this year, in Question No. 607 of that day.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for legislation in this area. The prevention/detection of driving while disqualified is a matter for An Garda Síochána, and falls within the remit of the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality.

The legislation is clear on the question of disqualification. It is an offence to drive while disqualified. When a person is disqualified, the notice of disqualification directs them to surrender their licence to the National Driver Licensing Service (NDLS) within 14 days. The disqualification period runs irrespective of licence surrender.

Copies of the notice to disqualified drivers are provided electronically to An Garda Síochána and the NDLS. Instances where the licence has not been surrendered are flagged on the relevant records on the National Vehicle Driver File, which is also provided to An Garda Síochána.

Surrender of the licence is not in any case the key issue. People who surrender their licences might continue to drive while disqualified, and people who do not surrender their licences may not necessarily drive.

An Garda Síochána can demand production of a driving licence and may seize a licence where they have reasonable grounds for believing that the individual has been disqualified. They may also arrest people who are driving while disqualified.

I have indicated that I intend to legislate so that the RSA can publish lists of people disqualified from driving. This 'naming and shaming' will make it more difficult for people to drive while disqualified. The new measure will be part of the forthcoming RSA Amendment Bill.

### **Traffic Management**

35. **Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to alleviate congestion by examining possible solutions such as an outer ring-road motorway to stop reliance on the M50 and examining current public transport costs, in view of the

increasing traffic congestion in Dublin and the fact that major public transport projects, such as metro north, are not due for commencement or completion for a number of years. [14247/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I fully recognise that there is considerable evidence emerging of increased travel demand across the Dublin Region in general.

Insofar as congestion issues in Dublin are concerned, the National Transport Authority's (NTA) transport strategy for the Greater Dublin Area provides the overarching framework for the planning and delivery of transport infrastructure and services over the next two decades. Addressing urban congestion on both the strategic road network and locally in certain locations is an important theme in the Strategy. The measures proposed are linked to an analysis of current and projected levels of travel demand across the region.

The Strategy does not include the implementation of the Leinster Outer Orbital during its lifetime. Other large scale projects proposed in the Strategy include the DART Expansion Programme, New Metro North, and various other light rail projects. However, as the Deputy correctly notes, it will not be possible to deliver these projects in the short to medium term due to planning and design requirements as well as the significant capital requirements. Therefore, the only option to tackle congestion in the short to medium term is to radically improve the bus system to deliver a step change in performance across the GDA and to complement that improved public transport system with a network of park and ride sites.

I must highlight that already planned projects for the period 2015-2018 which include Luas Cross City, the Phoenix Park Tunnel, additional bus fleet and bus lane infrastructure, small scale interventions on the M50 and numerous other measures will go some way to addressing growing travel demand. However, we must look to a greatly strengthened bus system as the basis for tackling congestion. This requires a step-change in funding and I will be making a strong case for increased public transport investment as part of the Mid-Term Review of the Government's Capital Plan.

### **Harbours and Piers**

36. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the discussions or communications he has had with Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company or Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council with regard to the future governance of Dún Laoghaire Harbour; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14068/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company is designated under National Ports Policy for transfer to Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council.

Since the transfer process commenced, senior officials from my Department have met with Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company, and the CE and senior officials of Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, on a number of occasions, to clarify issues raised and to advise on the transfer process. My Department is kept apprised of developments as part of the regular communications that take place between the company and shareholder.

Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council procured consultants to conduct due diligence of the Dun Laoghaire Harbour Company. The completed due diligence report was presented by the Chief Executive to the Council meeting held on 9 January 2017. The Council has engaged a risk and finance consultant to produce a Risk Assessment on the main issues identified in the report. This will enable the Council to fully understand the implications of models of transfer

and the responsibility that will transfer in financial and other terms. I understand that both the Council and the port are engaging with the risk assessor. Officials from my Department also recently met with the risk assessor to give the shareholder perspective on National Ports Policy and to explain the different models of transfer.

The process of transferring governance of Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company to Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council is progressing. However, the future governance and operational structures of the port are primarily matters for agreement between the Council and the port company. When the risk assessment process is completed, I expect matters to progress towards agreeing a model and a date of transfer.

### **Tourism Promotion**

37. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to allocate a specific marketing budget to Fáilte Ireland to promote County Donegal specifically, further to the county being nominated by a magazine (details supplied) as the coolest place on the planet to visit in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14073/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Tourism Ireland is responsible for promoting the island of Ireland overseas as a holiday and business tourism destination and undertakes extensive marketing campaigns in 23 key source markets for tourism to Ireland. Within Ireland, individual counties may compete for domestic visitors. Research carried out for Tourism Ireland indicates that the level of awareness of Ireland's county boundaries is low among potential overseas visitors, and therefore expenditure by public or private entities on marketing an individual county to consumers in overseas markets is unlikely to provide an adequate return on investment.

I am delighted that National Geographic Traveller has named Donegal at the top of its list of 'coolest places to visit' in 2017. Donegal features prominently in Tourism Ireland's global marketing activity. For example last autumn, filming took place at places like Malin Head, Fanad Lighthouse, Glenveagh National Park and Slieve League in Donegal for Tourism Ireland footage of the Donegal section of the Wild Atlantic Way. Tourism Ireland has rolled out a series of Wild Atlantic Way advertising campaigns in overseas markets over the past year, in which Donegal has featured.

Donegal, and the accolade received from National Geographic Traveller, are highlighted on Tourism Ireland's suite of international websites as well as through Tourism Ireland's social media platforms. Donegal continues to be extensively promoted through a series of Wild Atlantic Way adverts and will feature in the upcoming Star Wars film providing a superb promotional opportunity. Tourism Ireland also works with overseas travel, lifestyle and special interest media as part of their overseas promotional programme. I understand that Tourism Ireland recently provided details of such campaigns to the Deputy.

In 2016 Fáilte Ireland invested €1.7m on marketing the Wild Atlantic Way and along with the local authorities from Donegal to Galway have co-funded a marketing campaign in Great Britain in 2017 in which Donegal features heavily.

### **Industrial Disputes**

38. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the collapse of the talks between management and unions at Bus Éireann; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [14256/17]

89. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on whether the talks between management and unions at Bus Éireann were destined to end without agreement due to the parameters of their discussion being constrained by the level of subsidy provided by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14257/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I propose to answer Questions Nos. 38 and 89 together.

First of all I want to be very clear that the issues currently arising within Bus Éireann stem from their commercial Expressway routes and are not related to taxpayer funding.

The vast majority of Bus Éireann routes and passengers relate to its PSO business and are funded by the taxpayer. In Budget 2017 I secured an 11% increase in the amount of funding available for public transport services generally and Bus Éireann will share in that increase. The Deputy is aware that Bus Éireann actually received 21% more in taxpayer funding last year as compared to 2015 and that I have publicly committed to further increasing the level of subvention as resources allow in future Budgets.

Bus Éireann also operates a much smaller network of commercial services which do not receive taxpayer funding and operate in competition with other operators. These services lose money and those losses must be addressed.

I am obviously disappointed in relation to last week's news that the WRC-led discussions between unions and Bus Éireann adjourned without agreement.

The seriousness of the Company's financial situation requires renewed efforts to reach an understanding on how to solve the company's problems. I am encouraged that recent public comments from both sides focused on the potential for a common ground to be found on potential efficiencies within the Company.

I have repeatedly stated that a difficult situation such as this involves different stakeholders with different roles to play. I have been proactive in increasing taxpayer funding for PSO services, reviewing the level of funding provided for the Free Travel Scheme and assuring rural Ireland as regards the powers of the NTA to maintain public transport connectivity.

However, last week's comments by both management and unions reinforce my stated position that there are issues internal to the Company which require attention if this situation is to be resolved. I do not believe that any member of this House can ignore the existence of such issues when both a Company's management and a Company's trade unions are highlighting inefficiencies in work practices which require attention, as both did last week.

I'm clear that the situation requires realistic negotiations between management and unions in order to address the inefficiencies both are seemingly agreed upon as existing and which will then presumably provide a pathway to a sustainable future for the Company.

As always, the industrial relations machinery of the State remains available to assist the parties in reaching a realistic, fair and sustainable settlement.

### **Military Aircraft Landings**

39. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport further to Parliamentary Question No. 593 of 21 February 2017, notwithstanding the fact that call signs are

a matter for the airline concerned, his views on any difficulties in data-gathering or otherwise caused by aircraft going to and from Shannon regularly switching from military to civilian call signs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14251/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** International civil aviation is governed by the Chicago Convention. Annex 10 of the Convention deals with aeronautical telecommunication and contains detailed regulations in relation to all radio communication matters, including the use of call signs by aircraft. Call signs are unique identifiers used by an aircraft in radio communications, in compliance with international and national rules. It is not unusual for an aircraft to use different call signs for different flights.

The aircraft referred to by the Deputy in parliamentary question number 593 of 21 February 2017 was operated by Miami Air International. The aircraft arrived in Shannon using the BSK call sign used by Miami Air and departed Shannon using the CMB call sign for the next leg of its journey. The CMB call sign is used by civil aircraft on charter to the US military.

Such changes of call sign are not unusual and are permissible under international rules. I am not aware that such changes cause any difficulties.

### **Cycling Policy**

40. **Deputy Catherine Martin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps taken by his Department or agencies under its aegis to provide safe cycling routes to all primary and secondary schools and third level colleges in pursuance of objective 4.1 of the national cycle policy framework; and if he anticipates that the target in that objective of providing all of these routes by 2020 will be met. [14244/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I fully recognise the importance of the provision of walking and cycling infrastructure which supports sustainable travel to schools and colleges. The Deputy will recall that the precise targets set out in the Smarter Travel policy and the National Cycle Policy Framework were largely predicated on the availability of the substantial funding which did not transpire because of the significant scaling back in overall public investment in response to the economic and fiscal crises. Nevertheless, despite this, considerable progress has been made and continues to be made to provide the infrastructure and other interventions to enable and support children and students to travel to schools and third level colleges in a sustainable way.

My Department has adopted a multi-programme approach in addressing this issue. Investment has been made in the delivery of programmes such as Active Travel Towns and Smarter Travel Demonstration Areas, to fund the building of infrastructure with a particular focus on the delivery of walking and cycling routes in the environs of local schools.

The Department also provides funding to the National Transport Authority for the development of sustainable transport infrastructure within the regional cities and the GDA, through the Sustainable Measures Grants and Regional Cities Programmes, part of which addresses improvements to cycling and walking to schools and colleges.

Investment has also been made in promotional programmes such as the Workplace and Campus Travel and Green School Travel Programmes to encourage children, their parents and other students to travel more sustainably. The Workplace and Campus Travel Programme targets third level institutions to encourage students and staff to use sustainable modes of transport. The Green-Schools Programme encourages and supports primary and secondary schools to use sustainable transport as a means of travel to school. Green Schools Travel Officers also con-



tinually work very closely with Local Authorities and the Road Safety Authority to identify gaps in the provision of infrastructure and other barriers to enabling children to travel to school either by walking or cycling. The Department also separately funds cycle parking in schools.

A new cycling training standard, Cycle Right, is currently being rolled out across the country to provide a standardised training programme for all school-going children to provide them with the necessary skills to cycle safely including cycling to school. It is in all our interests to continue to encourage children, their parents and students to use more sustainable forms of transport.

### **Industrial Disputes**

41. **Deputy Brendan Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures he has taken to resolve the Bus Éireann dispute; the number of times and when he has met Bus Éireann management; the number of times and when he has met the trade unions involved since 1 January 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14238/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** In recent months I have taken action on a number of fronts in order to address issues raised by stakeholders in Bus Éireann.

I have increased the amount of Public Service Obligation (PSO) funding so that in 2017 almost €263million will be provided to the NTA to allocate to public transport operators. That figure represents an 11% increase on 2016 and I have publicly committed toward further increasing the level of PSO funding in coming years as financial resources permit.

I have assured rural Ireland that the NTA will continue to use its statutory powers to ensure public transport connectivity is maintained for rural communities affected by changes to routes in the commercial bus market.

I have written to my colleague the Minister for Social Protection in relation to concerns about the level of funding associated with the Free Travel Scheme and we have mandated our Departments to work together to review this matter.

In relation to the company's industrial relations issues, I am clear that I cannot and will not involve myself in discussions relating to the way in which the Company organises itself. I have consistently urged both Bus Éireann management and trade unions to constructively engage on those internal matters which require attention within the Company.

Since January 1st 2017 I have met with the Chair of Bus Éireann on two occasions, January 12th and January 30th. I have not had any meetings with the Bus Éireann trade unions in the same period.

### **EU Regulations**

42. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the timeframe for the delivery of primary legislation and a statutory instrument in respect of EU Regulation No. 598/2014. [14253/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I refer the Deputy to my response to Priority Question No 1.

As I stated, officials in my Department are currently engaged with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel in order to finalise the details relating to the statutory instrument which will transpose EU Regulation 598/2014. While I fully recognise and regret that the legislative requirements to give full effect to Regulation 598 have been delayed, I want to reassure the Deputy that the reason for the delay is to ensure that the introduction of the new noise regulatory regime is robust and fit for purpose. The timing and extent of the primary legislation required will be guided by the advice received from the Attorney General's Office.

However, my current priority is to appoint the IAA as Competent Authority for noise management at Dublin Airport by way of the Statutory Instrument. In that context, I can assure the Deputy that the draft Statutory Instrument is nearing completion and I expect to be in a position to sign off on this important piece of legislation in the coming weeks.

### **Transport Infrastructure Provision**

43. **Deputy John Curran** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the specific transport projects and infrastructure he will seek to have added to the capital plan to help alleviate a worsening traffic situation in Dublin, in the context of the Government's capital plan review in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13994/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The funding allocation for public transport under the current Capital Plan is €3.6 billion. Due to constrained levels of funding available in the early years of the plan, the priority in this period is to ensure the safety and efficiency of existing transport infrastructure. Funding of €2.6bn has been prioritised for essential 'steady state' maintenance and asset renewal of the public transport network. The remaining €1bn of the total allocation available for public transport is being invested to help address growing congestion driven by the recovery and population growth.

As the Deputy is aware, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the implementation and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). The need to address urban congestion was a key element in the development of the NTA's *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035*.

The NTA is currently preparing an Implementation Plan for the delivery of the GDA Strategy for the period 2017-2022. Key to implementation is the capital funding that will be available for investment in public transport infrastructure over the period. The allocation for Public Transport under the Capital Plan 2016-2021 includes funding for capacity enhancements including completion of the Luas Cross City Project, renewal and replacement of the PSO bus fleet and other improvements to the bus and rail networks. Construction of the new Metro North project will commence around 2021 and be operational around 2026/27. Funding is also included for elements of the DART Expansion Programme including the extension of the DART to Balbriggan.

As the Deputy is aware, a mid-term review of the Capital Plan has been initiated and I will be making the case for increased funding for public transport in that context. I consider that the optimum approach to tackle congestion over the short to medium term is to radically improve the bus system to deliver a step change in performance across the GDA region and in our regional cities to complement that improved public transport system with a network of park and ride sites. Such measures can be complemented by investment to increase capacity across public transport and to improve the infrastructure for sustainable transport options.

## Road Network

44. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to upgrade the main Bailieborough to Virginia road in County Cavan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14003/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in Cavan is the statutory responsibility of Cavan County Council, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the Council. My Department has not received an application for funding from Cavan County Council in respect of this road.

Given the cutbacks in State funding for regional and local roads since the financial crisis, it has been necessary to curtail the grant programme for major new regional and local road schemes and for major realignment schemes in order to protect the funding available for the maintenance of the existing network. The bulk of the funding allocated under the Capital Plan is, therefore, earmarked for the maintenance and renewal of the road network with some limited investment in the new projects.

I announced the 2017 regional and local road allocations to local authorities (including Cavan County Council) on 24 January and all grant funding has now been allocated.

## Road Improvement Schemes

45. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if plans are being made to reopen the local improvement scheme in places such as County Longford due to the huge demands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13998/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of the local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the local authority's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

Maintenance of private laneways/roads not taken in charge by local authorities is the responsibility of the landowners concerned. Due to the major cutbacks in roads funding it was necessary for my Department to cease making separate allocations to local authorities in respect of the Local Improvement Scheme (LIS). The approved scheme remains intact and local authorities can use a proportion of State grant funding for LIS should they wish to do so.

While there is a modest increase in funding for roads this year, it will take some years yet under the Capital Plan to restore "steady state" funding levels for regional and local roads. The primary focus has to continue to be on the maintenance and renewal of public roads. Local authorities can continue to use a proportion of their Discretionary Grant for the Local Improvement Scheme in 2017.

In light of the provision in the Programme for Government indicating that, as the economy recovers, the Government will promote increased funding for Community Involvement and Local Improvement Schemes. I will review the scope for making a separate grant allocation once the planned Review of the Capital Plan is completed.

## **Cross-Border Co-operation**

46. **Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his Department’s main initiatives relating to cross-Border co-operation with Northern Ireland with regard to issues pertaining to sport; the plans which have been put in place to both maintain and enhance sporting links with Northern Ireland in view of the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union; and the number of meetings he has held with his Northern Ireland counterpart with regards to issues relating exclusively to sport. [14071/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I am very aware of the importance of cross border cooperation with Northern Ireland in the area of sport, particularly in a context where 45 of our National Governing Bodies of Sport operate on an all-island basis. My officials meet on a regular basis with their counterparts in Northern Ireland, with meetings involving extensive dialogue on topics of mutual interest pertaining to sport. This level of engagement will continue, as it is an important way to further enhance cross-border links and to facilitate continued cooperation across the range of sport-related matters, including any that may arise following on from the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union. I understand that Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland also enjoy a close working relationship, and my officials will keep abreast of relevant initiatives in cross-border cooperation led by those two bodies, in the context of the Department’s regular liaison meetings with Sport Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, Sport is a matter for the Minister and Department for Communities while Transport and Tourism are matters for the Minister and Department for Economy. While I have met with my Northern Irish counterpart with regards to issues relating exclusively to sport, I did not have an opportunity for any formal discussions.

## **Road Projects Status**

47. **Deputy Fiona O’Loughlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding the M7 widening project in County Kildare; the funding and timeline for this project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14012/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual national road projects is a matter for the Transport Infrastructure Ireland under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with local authorities.

As regards regional and local roads, responsibility for implementation of improvement projects rests with the relevant local authority which is Kildare County Council in this instance.

It has been agreed that, in the interest of economies of scale and delivery efficiency, the main design and construction elements of the Naas Bypass widening Scheme, Osberstown Interchange and Sallins Bypass Schemes are to be progressed as one construction contract. This contract is at tender at present and Kildare County Council is the contracting authority.

Subject to the satisfactory conclusion of the tender process, it is anticipated that construction will start later this year and that the three projects will be concluded on a phased basis over 2019/2020.

As regards financing, both TII and my Department will be making funding available over the construction programme period to meet the State’s commitments in relation to these Schemes.

In this context my Department has allocated €7.5 million for the Sallins Bypass this year while TII has allocated €13.61 million for the Naas Bypass widening.

### **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

48. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the increase in greenhouse gas emissions from transport compared to current levels that is anticipated to result from the implementation of the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2016 to 2035 approved by his predecessor; and the way this increase in emissions, in the region with the greatest potential for modal shift to active travel modes and public transport, can be reconciled with the obligations to reduce emissions drastically and transition to a low carbon society in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, in line with international commitments in the Paris Agreement. [14246/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035 (the “Strategy”), developed by the NTA, sets out a framework for the development of transport across the Dublin and Mid-East region over the next twenty years responding to a projected population increase from approximately 1.8 million to 2.3 million over that period (+27%), which, together with increasing employment, will result in increased travel demand of approximately 28.5%.

In preparing the Strategy my Department and the NTA were conscious that various policies related to climate change, air quality and associated action plans were under development including the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015. The Strategy committed that its implementation would incorporate the relevant targets and actions arising from these and related policies in the area of transport energy.

The purpose of the Strategy is to provide for the efficient, effective and sustainable movement of people and goods over the twenty year period of the framework. The measures proposed address this purpose and achieve a substantial change in mode share and in total numbers carried by sustainable modes. The Strategy unequivocally commits to promoting transport options that will reduce carbon emissions.

The methodology of measuring the expected impacts of the Strategy is to compare a future year emission scenario both with and without the Strategy in place. During the preparation of the Strategy, an assessment was carried out to evaluate CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the absence of any of the policies that might be included in the National Mitigation Plan, and in the absence of any future engine technology improvements or future fuel efficiency improvements. As a result of the projected shift in total numbers carried by sustainable modes a decrease in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of approximately 4% would be achieved in 2035 with the Transport Strategy in place compared to the situation without its implementation.

In order for Ireland to effectively and equitably contribute to the EU emissions reduction commitments in line with the Paris Agreement and the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, an ambitious low-carbon development strategy is being developed. My Department is working closely with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCA) and the Department of Agriculture to prepare our National Mitigation Plan.

Transport will have to play a significant role on the national mitigation effort. The measures under consideration for transport will be wide-ranging and will focus on modal shift, movement to alternative fuels, and targeted behavioural change. To date, considerable progress has been

achieved through measures aimed at promoting improved technologies and changing behaviour. The draft mitigation plan is currently available for extensive public consultation.

### **Taxi Regulations**

49. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his Department's rationale, implemented by the NTA on behalf of the Department, for not issuing licences to taxis that are over ten years old, in view of the existing checks that exist to ensure the roadworthiness of cars; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14224/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I refer the Deputy to my answer to her Question on the same topic (ref no. 13275/17) which I answered on 21 March 2017.

### **European Fund for Strategic Investments**

50. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the options he is exploring for availing of the opportunities provided under the European Fund for Strategic Investments, EFSI, to boost capital expenditure on transport; if he is exploring any additional PPP projects under the EFSI; and if not, the reason this is the case. [14236/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The EIB - Ireland Financial Group, chaired by my colleague the Minister for Finance, is exploring specific issues relating to financing including opportunities and challenges for financing transport connectivity projects and the potential role the EIB may be able to play in these. My Department and agencies are participating in this exercise.

The Department actively encourages all transport sectors to explore all avenues of finance available including domestic banks, Trans European Network -transport (TENT), Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), European Investment Bank (EIB), Irish Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) and the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI), to secure the most suitable funding instrument at the most favourable commercial rates. In many cases, a mix of funding instruments is used for capital projects by ports, roads aviation and public transport sectors.

There are no specific transport projects that have been assisted under the EFSI as yet but some have been co-funded and assisted through CEF and Interreg programme (a European Territorial Cooperation programme that aims to stimulate cross border and inter-regional cooperation in the European Union). My Department has assisted them with their applications where appropriate. In addition a number of these State companies engage independently with national banks, European Commission and the European Investment Bank with regard to obtaining funding of their projects.)

Under the Capital Plan 2016 to 2021 no additional Road PPP projects are planned. The previously approved projects are all at construction stage. As part of the Capital Plan Review I understand that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has set up a High Level Group to provide the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform with an evidence based analysis and recommendations on the future role of using PPPs (and concessions) as a procurement option in the delivery of capital infrastructure, compared to traditional procurement methods including an assessment of risks arising from traditional as compared to PPP procurement of large capital projects. This analysis will be delivered in time to inform the Mid Term Capital Review.

## **Bus Éireann**

51. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the contingency plans he has organised in the event of a national bus strike at Bus Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14219/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Obviously any strike action impacting Bus Éireann services will inconvenience the travelling public, particularly those without alternative transport options. I am however hopeful that such an event can be avoided.

While I am obviously disappointed in relation to last week's news that the WRC-led discussions between unions and Bus Éireann adjourned without agreement, I was encouraged by public comments from both sides which focused on the potential for common ground to be found on potential efficiencies within the Company relating to work practices etc.

As the Deputy will be aware, Public Service Obligation (PSO) routes operated by Bus Éireann are provided under contract to the National Transport Authority (NTA) and I am aware that the NTA are monitoring the developing situation; however, a strike will undoubtedly greatly inconvenience the travelling public. Of course any loss of contracted service will also mean Bus Éireann is liable for financial penalties to be applied to it.

Outside of its PSO contracted routes Bus Éireann also operates on commercial routes through its Expressway service. On the majority of these services, Expressway operates in competition with other operators on some or all of a particular route. Obviously therefore in the event of strike action in Expressway, a significant number of the travelling public will have other transport options available.

I think it clear that a strike is in nobody's interests - neither the Company, employees or the travelling public. I urge both the Company and its trade unions to engage in realistic negotiations with a view to urgently resolving this situation.

## **Tourism Promotion**

52. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will liaise with Fáilte Ireland to ensure that there is a marketing budget put in place to promote County Donegal, further to the county being nominated by a magazine (details supplied) as the coolest place on the planet to visit in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14072/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Tourism Ireland is responsible for promoting the island of Ireland overseas as a holiday and business tourism destination and undertake extensive marketing campaigns in 23 key source markets for tourism to Ireland. Within Ireland, individual counties may compete for domestic visitors. Research carried out for Tourism Ireland indicates that the level of awareness of Ireland's county boundaries is low among potential overseas visitors, and therefore expenditure by public or private entities on marketing an individual county to consumers in overseas markets is unlikely to provide an adequate return on investment.

I am delighted that National Geographic Traveller has named Donegal at the top of its list of 'coolest places to visit' in 2017. Donegal features prominently in Tourism Ireland's global marketing activity. For example last autumn, filming took place at places like Malin Head,

Fanad Lighthouse, Glenveagh National Park and Slieve League in Donegal for Tourism Ireland footage of the Donegal section of the Wild Atlantic Way. Tourism Ireland has rolled out a series of Wild Atlantic Way advertising campaigns in overseas markets over the past year, in which Donegal has featured.

Donegal, and the accolade received from National Geographic Traveller, are highlighted on Tourism Ireland's suite of international websites as well as through Tourism Ireland's social media platforms. Donegal continues to be extensively promoted through a series of Wild Atlantic Way adverts and will feature in the upcoming Star Wars film providing a superb promotional opportunity. Tourism Ireland also works with overseas travel, lifestyle and special interest media as part of their overseas promotional programme. I understand that Tourism Ireland recently provided details of such campaigns to the Deputy.

In 2016 Fáilte Ireland invested €1.7m on marketing the Wild Atlantic Way and, along with the local authorities from Donegal to Galway, have co-funded a marketing campaign in Great Britain in 2017 in which Donegal features heavily.

### **Motor Insurance**

53. **Deputy Declan Breathnach** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to the problem for road haulage companies whereby no insurance company here will insure a HGV driver under 25 years of age; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that at 25 years of age, drivers must prove they have two years experience; if his attention has been drawn to discrepancies between Ireland and other European countries in relation to motor insurance whereby it is easier for younger HGV drivers to get insurance in other European countries; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that insurance costs for the HGV sector are prohibitive here causing 30% of the Irish fleet to get insurance abroad; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14217/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The provision of insurance cover and the price at which it is offered is a commercial matter for insurance companies, and is based on an assessment of the risks they are willing to accept and adequate provisioning to meet those risks. These are considered by insurance companies on a case by case basis and can include claims history, penalty points, and driver experience. Road Safety Authority research indicates that young drivers are over represented in road deaths in Ireland as referenced in the RSA Provisional Reviews of Fatal Collisions for 2016 (16 fatalities or 20% of all driver fatalities), and for other recent years.

The issue of drivers under 25 not being insured and of drivers over 25 requiring two years experience has not been raised by the insurance industry with my Department. However, the Deputy will be aware of the Cost of Insurance Working Group, chaired by Minister of State at the Department of Finance Eoghan Murphy, which produced a report identifying the main causes for the high costs of motor insurance in recent years, it formulated a number of recommendations for addressing these, and has now begun work on implementing these recommendations. <http://www.finance.gov.ie/sites/default/files/170110%20Report%20on%20the%20Cost%20of%20Motor%20Insurance%202017.pdf>. These are all designed to lower the cost of motor insurance for all motorists.

The issue of Access to cross-border insurance and the cost of insurance for Irish registered haulage vehicles is covered at 5.3 of the Report. The report also contains a recommendation (No. 5) and two action points (no. 8 and 9.) regarding the removal of cross-border barriers in the motor insurance sector, responsibility for which has been assigned to the Department of



Finance.

### **Sports Events**

54. **Deputy Brendan Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the role his Department is playing in Ireland's bid for the 2023 Rugby World Cup; the number of other Departments that are involved; the status of the work completed to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14239/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** On 4 October 2016 World Rugby announced that Ireland had successfully completed the Applicant Phase of the bid to host the RWC in 2023 and had progressed to the Candidate Phase of the competition which was launched by the IRFU and both Governments on 15 November 2016. Both Governments are fully behind the bid and my Department's role is to support the Bid Team and manage the interaction with Government Departments to ensure the Public Sector requirements of the bid are delivered.

In this regard it supports the work of the Inter-Departmental/Agency Group (IDG) which was established to oversee the delivery of the Public Sector requirements. It also maintains a close liaison with the Northern Ireland Department of Economy and sits on the Northern Ireland IDG.

Ireland's bid will cross over the remit of all public services and that is why we are working closely with all Government departments and agencies. To date, ten departments, as well as a number of agencies and other bodies, have been involved supporting and inputting into the bid which is due to be submitted to World Rugby by 1 June 2017.

### **Road Projects**

55. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will ensure that the N20 motorway upgrade between Limerick and Cork will be included in the Government's forthcoming capital plan; and if he considers this road project as a national priority. [14234/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual national road projects is a matter for the Transport Infrastructure Ireland (formerly known as the NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter in the first instance for TII in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act.

The Capital Plan published in September 2015 outlined proposed transport investment priorities to 2022. The transport element of the Capital Plan did provide for some targeted investment in a number of new projects in the Munster region including the N8/N25 Dunkettle Interchange and the N22 Ballyvourney to Macroom schemes. In addition, a number of other schemes targeted at removing bottlenecks and upgrading port access, will commence subject to necessary consents. It was not possible to include the M20 in the Capital Plan as the scale of investment to deliver it was not affordable.

I am conscious of the potential regional development benefits of an upgrade of the N20 and

the significant interest in finding a means to at least restart planning work on the route. In this regard TII is reviewing the status of work undertaken on the previous planning application and is updating certain inputs including traffic studies. However as things currently stand, I do not have the funding available to progress this scheme to full planning approval stage.

I do expect, however, that the M20 Cork to Limerick motorway project will be looked at as part of the planned Mid-Term Review of the Capital Plan.

### **Bus Éireann Services**

56. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his position regarding the continuation of Bus Éireann services on the N78 route from Athy to Kilkenny and the N7 route from Borris-in-Ossory to Monasterevin. [14002/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The Deputy is likely aware that rural Ireland is served by two types of public transport bus services. The first type is those services which are funded by the Exchequer through either the Public Service Obligation or the Rural Transport funding programmes. In Budget 2017 I secured an 11% cumulative increase in the amount of funding available for both programmes which will underpin the delivery of new and improved taxpayer funded bus services across rural Ireland. I have also committed publicly to further increasing the funding of those programmes in the future as resources allow.

The second type of bus services in rural Ireland are those commercial bus services provided by operators under licence from the National Transport Authority pursuant to the Public Transport Regulation Act 2009. While public commentary tends to focus on these services in the context of the major inter-urban routes, commercial bus services also frequently connect rural towns and villages across the State. In 2015 around 23 million people travelled on a commercial bus service, which represents approximately 9% of all public transport journeys that year.

I have repeatedly assured rural Ireland that the National Transport Authority has the statutory powers available to it to ensure continued public transport connectivity for communities who may lose services in cases where a commercial operator introduces service changes. In its recent response to proposed Expressway route changes announced by Bus Éireann, the NTA has utilised these statutory powers through for example announcing increased PSO services and amending the scheduling of existing rural transport services in order to address identified transport needs caused by the Expressway changes.

In relation to the specific routes raised by the Deputy, Bus Éireann does not serve Borris-in-Ossory or operate between Athy and Kilkenny.

The NTA's National Journey Planner indicates that Borris-In-Ossory is currently served by two private commercial bus operators, one connecting the town with Dublin Airport and the other a local service linking into Portlaoise. In relation to connections between Athy and Kilkenny I understand there is both a commercial bus service and a PSO bus service using the N78, while both places are of course also served by the PSO supported rail link.

### **Tourism Promotion**

57. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the Lakelands tourism brand, as promised in the programme for Government; the reason there is a delay in the development of the strategy; if he will provide a commitment that counties

Longford and Westmeath will be covered in view of the fact there is no coherent strategy in place which covers the area at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14011/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** My Department's role in relation to tourism lies primarily in the area of national tourism policy. It is not directly involved in the management or development of individual tourism projects. This is an operational matter for the Board and Management of Fáilte Ireland. While the Department provides funding to Fáilte Ireland for investment in tourism offerings, it is not involved in the administration of those programmes.

That said, I can advise the Deputy that in keeping with the commitment in the Programme for Partnership Government to the development of the "Ireland's Lakelands" brand, Fáilte Ireland is undertaking a Destination Development and Feasibility Study focussing on those areas that lie between the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East, including counties that border the Shannon. Fáilte Ireland expects to have a final set of recommendations from the study in the coming months.

Given that the study is being undertaken by Fáilte Ireland I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for direct reply to the Deputy. Please contact my private office if you have not received a reply within ten working days.

### Health and Safety

58. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of the instructions issued by his Department regarding the regular testing and safety checks to be performed on helicopters used by the Irish Coast Guard. [14252/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Following a competitive tender process on 22nd July 2010 a contract agreement for search and rescue helicopters was signed between the then Minister for Transport and CHC Ireland Ltd. These Helicopters respond to emergencies at sea, inland waterways, offshore islands and mountains. The helicopters are operated by CHC Ireland Ltd and the fully qualified crews are employees of CHC Ireland Ltd. The helicopter service contract commenced on 1st July 2012 for a period of 10 years. The contract requires that CHC Ireland Ltd comply with all applicable Irish Aviation Authority (IAA), European Safety Agency (EASA), and international Civil Aviation organisation (ICAO) guidance, regulation, standards and recommended practises.

### Road Projects

59. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to fund the construction of the remaining section of the Portlaoise orbital route. [14001/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in Laois is the statutory responsibility of Laois County Council, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the local authority's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority. The Portlaoise Southern Circular route is among the schemes included in the Capital Plan 2016-2021 subject to achieving the necessary project approvals (including approval from An Bord Pleanála for the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) and compliance with the requirements of this Department's Capital Appraisal Framework (CAF)). It is, therefore, the respon-

sibility of Laois County Council to progress this scheme through the approval process and the timescale for the progression of the scheme to construction depends on when that process is completed. My Department is currently liaising with the Council in respect of the CAF and an allocation of €1m has been provided to Laois County Council for this scheme in 2017.

### **Roads Maintenance Funding**

60. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his contingency plan to ensure that regional and secondary roads are properly maintained in view of State under-funding of roads for the past decade; the level of funding he anticipates will be available to his Department for this purpose in 2018; if his Department has conducted any review of the potential problems that will be caused if funding is not brought to a sufficient level to ensure that roads are properly maintained; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14225/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy is aware, public funding for Ireland's national roads fell significantly during the recession. Analysis undertaken by my Department resulting in the publication of a Strategic Framework for Investment in Land Transport in 2015 estimated on a conservative basis that expenditure of €580 million per annum is needed to keep the regional and local road network in a steady state condition. This analysis also pointed to a similar gross steady state requirement for national roads (taking into account commitments for PPP road projects).

Due to the economic downturn, for the last number of years only half the required road pavement works have been undertaken on the regional and local road network. This means that the backlog of repair works is increasing and a recent survey based on limited data suggests that the backlog of repairs has increased from €3 billion in 2005 to over €10 billion in 2016.

The 7 year transport element of the Capital Plan published in September 2015 includes provision for expenditure of €6 billion on the road network. The Capital Plan provides for a gradual build up in capital funding from a relatively low base in 2016 towards the levels needed to support maintenance and improvement works by 2022. I announced the 2017 regional and local road allocations on 24 January 2017. While 2017 sees an increase in overall funding, it will take some years yet under the Capital Plan to restore "steady state" funding levels for land transport and to progress the improvement projects included in the Plan. Allocations in respect of regional and local roads in 2018 are part of the Estimates process.

### **Public Transport**

61. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to plans by the National Transport Authority, NTA or his Department to increase funding to Bus Éireann or to private operators of national bus routes in the coming year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14220/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy will be aware, exchequer funding to bus operators is only provided to those who operate Public Service Obligation (PSO) services in accordance with public service contracts entered into with the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008. Currently the NTA has entered into public service contracts with Bus Átha Cliath and Bus Éireann, with very localised PSO services in certain areas also provided under contract by M&A Coaches Ltd. and Whartons Travel Limited. The Deputy will find the contracts available to view on the

website of the NTA, *www.nationaltransport.ie*.

In Budget 2017 I secured an 11% increase in the amount of taxpayer funding which will be made available to fund PSO services across both bus and rail. That increase builds on the increases made available in 2016 and means that almost €263million will be available to the NTA in 2017 to support PSO services.

As a provider of PSO services, Bus Éireann will benefit from the increase I secured in the Budget; however, the final allocation will of course be dependent on the Company's performance of its contractual obligations.

As I have repeatedly stated in recent weeks, last year the Company benefitted from a 21% increase in the amount of exchequer funding provided to it as compared with 2015; however, that funding can only be provided in respect of PSO services, it cannot be provided in respect of commercial services.

### **Taxi Data**

62. **Deputy Catherine Martin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of wheelchair accessible taxis that operate here; if this is sufficient to ensure a reliable supply for passengers at all times; and his plans to improve the availability of wheelchair accessible taxis during the lifetime of the Government. [14243/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The regulation of the small public service vehicles (SPSV) industry, including issues pertaining to wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs), is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013. I have therefore 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.

### **Roadworthiness Testing**

63. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will desist from bringing in NCT testing for tractors capable of doing 40 kilometres an hour and less (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14014/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Directive 2014/45/EU on the periodic roadworthiness testing of motor vehicles and their trailers, requires Member States, from May 2018, to introduce compulsory testing for tractors with a maximum design speed exceeding 40 km/h which are being used for commercial road haulage purposes. There is no requirement on Member States to introduce compulsory testing for such tractors used exclusively for agricultural purposes. There are no opt outs from the terms of this Directive. My Department will be working with the Road Safety Authority to implement the aforementioned mandatory requirement in line with the May 2018 deadline. It is anticipated that the Authority will be engaging with key stakeholder groups and issuing guidance in relation to the implementation of this Directive as soon as practically possible.

### **Road Projects Status**

64. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the sta-

tus of a review process concerning a submission by Kildare County Council in relation to the southern distributor route Athy, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14249/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As I already stated in my response to Parliamentary Question No. 77 of Wednesday 8th February to the Deputy, the improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads, such as the Athy Distributor Road, is the statutory responsibility of Kildare County Council, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The Capital Plan 2016-2021 provides that a number of schemes, including the Athy Distributor Road, targeting bottlenecks in the road network will be progressed subject to necessary approvals. In this context the project has to meet the requirements of the Public Spending Code and my Department's Common Appraisal Framework for Transport Projects as well as obtaining planning approval. It is a matter for Kildare County Council to progress the scheme through the approval process. In relation to the project appraisal process, the Council has submitted the project Business Case and Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) documentation for consideration by my Department. Consideration of the project appraisal documentation involves a number of steps. As the project has an estimated cost in excess of €20 million, my Department's Economic and Financial Evaluation Unit in liaison with the Central Expenditure and Evaluation Unit (CEEU) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform will need to review the CBA for compliance with the Public Spending Code and my Department's Common Appraisal Framework. The overall Business Case will then need approval.

The project appraisal procedure will be progressed as soon as possible taking into account available resources.

I have made €1 million available to progress this project as part of 2017 Regional and Local Roads Grants.

### **Road Network**

65. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the recent delegation from Donegal County Council in relation to Fintra and Tyrconnell bridges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14005/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in Donegal is the statutory responsibility of Donegal County Council, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the Council. Together with my officials, I met with a delegation from Donegal County Council on 27 February to discuss Fintra Bridge and Tyrconnall Bridge in Donegal. I understand from Donegal County Council that Fintra bridge is structurally sound but is located on a sharp bend and the road width is quite restricted. In relation to Tyrconnall Bridge, Donegal County Council submitted its application list to my Department for the 2017 Bridge Rehabilitation Programme but Tyrconnall Bridge was not among the bridges submitted for funding in the 2017 application. No application in respect of this bridge was received by my Department for 2015 or for 2016.

Following the meeting with the Council, my Department is awaiting further information from Donegal County Council in respect of both Tyrconnall and Fintra bridges. All available funding for 2017 has been allocated.

## Greenways Development

66. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the progress that has been made in the planning of a greenway pedestrian and cycling route between Athlone and Galway; and when he expects such a route to go to design and construction phase. [14245/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy will be aware, concerns were expressed by some landowners in Galway following the publication of the initial 'preferred route' identified for the Greenway from Athlone to Galway and my predecessor instructed Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and Galway County Council to consult landowners along the route in relation to their concerns. Following the publication of the TII report on these consultations, a decision was taken in late 2015 to pause development of the Greenway west of the Shannon to allow all stakeholders to consider how best to progress this project. In January this year, Minister O'Donovan and I met with a delegation of landowners and elected representatives from the region to discuss this project and that provided us with a good understanding of the issues involved. It is recognised that the approach taken initially in relation to the preferred route was sub-optimal and lessons have been learned from that experience. My Department is currently developing a new strategy to set out a cohesive and forward looking approach to the development, funding and promotion of greenways generally and we will be consulting publicly on this in the near future. The proposed Strategy will include a recommended approach to be taken by authorities and agencies tasked with delivering greenway infrastructure where engagement and consultation with landowners is required and, when finalised, will inform the approach to be taken to progress the delivery of the section of the Dublin to Galway Greenway from Athlone to Galway.

In order to maintain momentum in the meantime, and to facilitate progress on the non-contentious elements of the project, the draft plan, Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) for the overall Galway to Dublin Greenway were published in January. It is important to point out that the SEA is high-level and looks at the corridor between Galway and Dublin; it does not look at any specific routing or alignment on this corridor. The majority of the submissions received on the plan were favourable and I intend to publish the final SEA and overall plan shortly. I expect that consultation on the detailed route alignment between Athlone and Galway will take place later this year informed by the new Greenways Strategy when finalised.

## Ministerial Functions

67. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the discussions he or his officials have had with the Minister of State in his Department regarding a sharing of duties and or portfolios; the areas the Minister of State has expressed specific interest in; if those areas have been assigned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14218/17]

75. **Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of the delegated functions to the Minister of State in his Department. [14015/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 67 and 75 together.

On 19th May 2016 The Taoiseach announced the appointment of Patrick O'Donovan T.D. as Minister of State in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport with responsibility for Tourism and Sport.

Based on this, I subsequently assigned the responsibilities set out below to Minister O'Donovan on an administrative basis in July 2016. In February 2017, Minister of State O'Donovan expressed his concern about confusion surrounding his role and responsibilities within the Department due, in his view, to a lack of certainty and clarity in the absence of a clear set of delegated functions. The Minister of State sought a clear set of delegated functions to address this.

I am aware that the previous Minister of State Ring had responsibility for sport and tourism at this Department but did not have a statutory delegation of functions. His functions were, as currently with Minister O'Donovan, assigned on an administrative basis.

Responsibilities of Minister of State O'Donovan.

- Minister of State O'Donovan has general responsibility for sport, with a particular focus on:

- the Sports Capital Programme;
- the Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme;
- engagement with Sport Ireland, National Governing Bodies and Local Sports Partnerships in relation to promoting participation in sport, recreation and physical activity and the promotion of high performance sport;
- oversight of the National Sports Campus; and
- engagement with the institutions of the European Union on sport matters, including attendance at the Council of Ministers when significant sports issues are to be discussed and attendance by a Minister is required.

- Minister of State O'Donovan also has general responsibility for domestic tourism, with a particular focus on:

- development of tourism product;
- domestic tourism marketing;
- Tourism generating events including festivals, sports, business, and cultural tourism

In addition to the allocated responsibilities, Minister of State O'Donovan will support the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Mr Shane Ross, TD, in relation to:

- Oireachtas business;
- international commitments;
- attendance at public events; and
- other matters as may be required.

## **Road Network**

68. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to improve the road network in County Meath. [14215/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** In relation to national



roads in County Meath, as Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual national road projects is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. As regards the regional road aspect of the proposal, the improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in its area is a statutory function of local authorities in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act, 1993. Works on such roads are a matter for the relevant local authority to be funded from its own resources supplemented by State road grants. Details of the 2017 national and regional and local road allocations to local authorities are available from the Dáil library.

### **Road Network**

69. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide an update on the realignment of the N14 road in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14006/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects (including the N14) is a matter for the Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter in the first instance for TII in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act. Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to TII for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you don't receive a reply within 10 working days.

*Question No. 70 answered with Question No. 31.*

### **Rail Services Provision**

71. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the suggestions in the NTA's rail review to discontinue certain rail services south of Gorey, which could leave Wexford town and Rosslare without a rail service to Dublin; if he will consider opening an express train service from Wexford town to Dublin in order to increase the number of passengers using the service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14231/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy is aware, the National Transport Authority (NTA) recently held a public consultation process to start a national debate on the current and future role of rail transport in Ireland. The public consultation was launched with the publication of a Rail Review 2016 report- which examined the funding required to support the heavy rail network now and into the future- together with a consultation document "The Role of Rail in Ireland and Funding its Delivery". I understand the NTA is now in the process of preparing a report on the consultation process. I intend to bring this report to Government. Undoubtedly, the findings of the consultation process will be used to inform and assist future decision making in relation to rail. While there has been much speculation regarding the future of individual rail lines, no closure decisions have been taken. I would emphasise that closure decisions would be premature in advance of my consideration of the outcome of the NTA's public consultation process and subsequent reporting back to Gov-

ernment on my overall approach.

### **Brexit Issues**

72. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he is engaging with the tourism sector with a view to identifying and offsetting the negative impact of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14227/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** In common with the rest of Government there has been deep analysis of the challenges which the tourism industry will face as a result of the outcome of the UK Referendum. There are several inter-departmental groups, each with a specific focus, preparing for BrExit and there has been significant engagement with industry and civic society. These engagements are informing the analysis, research and preparations. Specifically, Minister of State Patrick O'Donovan and I hosted an All-Island Dialogue on the impact of Brexit on the tourism and hospitality sector in Dundalk on 23 January. The feedback from tourism industry participants at the event reaffirmed the Government's analysis in relation to the implications of Brexit for tourism and I am committed to an ongoing dialogue with the tourism and hospitality industry as the Brexit negotiations proceed.

### **Road Projects Status**

73. **Deputy Tony McLoughlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the capital plan and his plans regarding the Collooney to Castlebaldwin N4 upgrade in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13993/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), formerly the National Roads Authority (NRA) under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to the TII for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you don't receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Local Improvement Scheme**

74. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will re-introduce the local improvement scheme; his views on the need for the scheme to repair and maintain private roads and laneways in rural Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14008/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of the local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the local authority's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority. Maintenance of private laneways/roads not taken in charge by local authorities is the responsibility of the landowners concerned. Due to the major cutbacks in roads funding it was necessary for my Department to cease making separate allocations to local authorities in respect of the Local Improvement Scheme (LIS). The approved scheme remains intact and local authorities can use

a proportion of State grant funding for LIS should they wish to do so. While there is a modest increase in funding for roads this year, it will take some years yet under the Capital Plan to restore “steady state” funding levels for regional and local roads. The primary focus has to continue to be on the maintenance and renewal of public roads. Local authorities can continue to use a proportion of their Discretionary Grant for the Local Improvement Scheme in 2017.

In light of the provision in the Programme for Government indicating that, as the economy recovers, the Government will promote increased funding for Community Involvement and Local Improvement Schemes, I will review the scope for making a separate grant allocation once the planned Review of the Capital Plan is completed.

*Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 67.*

### **Light Rail Projects Status**

76. **Deputy Brendan Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the progress that has been made on the new metro north project since March 2016; the preparatory works that are taking place; the timeframe for the preparatory works he expects will take place over the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14241/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), including the new Metro North project. Funding for the project is provided under the Government’s Capital Plan, allowing initially for the planning and design phases of the project, followed by the construction phase which is expected to commence in 2021 with a view to delivering the project by 2026/2027. The NTA and Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) have commenced preparatory work on the planning and design of new Metro North and a dedicated project Steering Group has been established which is meeting on a regular basis. The NTA, in collaboration with TII, is undertaking an option analysis and selection study of possible metro alignments and station locations. Arising from this work a final route and station configuration will be established. It is my understanding that the NTA and TII expect that this process will be complete by the end of 2017, after which a public consultation process will be undertaken in 2018.

### **Public Transport Provision**

77. **Deputy Joan Burton** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on whether the public bus service is a vital piece of infrastructure in rural communities; his plans to support such services and ensure there is an adequate and secure level of public transport provision in rural communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11609/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I am fully aware of the important role the bus fulfils in ensuring public transport connectivity for rural communities. This Government has supported that role through the 11% cumulative increase I secured in Budget 2017 for both the Public Service Obligation (PSO) programme and the Rural Transport Programme. That increase means that in 2017 approximately €277million be available to the National Transport Authority to support the delivery of these important programmes, which underpin the delivery of taxpayer funded bus services across rural Ireland. I have committed publicly to further increasing the funding of those programmes in the future as resources allow. Publicly funded bus services in rural Ireland are expanding and improving and that is reflected in the increases in passenger numbers, particularly within Bus Éireann’s PSO network.

That Exchequer financial support is supported at a policy level by the commitment given within the *Programme for a Partnership Government* to review public transport policy so as to ensure services are sustainable into the future and are meeting the needs of a modern economy. I am glad to say that this commitment is also reflected within the actions contained within *Realising our Rural Potential - Action Plan for Rural Development* which specifically references the rural transport dimension and the needs of rural communities.

I have no doubt the Deputy is aware that across rural Ireland the publicly funded bus services are complemented by a huge range of privately operated bus services. These bus services are provided by operators under licence from the National Transport Authority pursuant to the Public Transport Regulation Act 2009 and contrary to some reports are not solely focused on major inter-urban routes, but are also frequently found connecting rural towns and villages across the State. In 2015 around 23 million people travelled on a commercial bus service, which represents approximately 9% of all public transport journeys that year.

The National Transport Authority has assured rural Ireland that it has the statutory powers available to it to ensure continued public transport connectivity for communities who may lose services in cases where a commercial operator introduces service changes. The NTA has used those powers in the past and will do so again in the future if required.

### **Rail Network Expansion**

78. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the action he is taking to promote and advance the Navan rail line; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14216/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I refer the Deputy to my reply of the 8th February 2017 to Dáil Question No. 50 regarding the Navan rail line. The position remains as outlined in that reply.

### **Diaspora Centre Establishment**

79. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has reconsidered the decision by his predecessor to cancel the plans for a national diaspora centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14069/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** On 16 February 2015, having regard to the Tourism Policy Statement "People Place and Policy: Growing Tourism to 2025" and other considerations, it was agreed by the previous Government that it would not proceed with a single National Diaspora Centre. It is of course open to any individual promoter to seek support for the development of a centre through Fáilte Ireland's grants scheme for large tourism projects. The scheme sets out to encourage innovation to support the long-term sustainable development of tourism across Ireland. In order to facilitate innovation, the scheme takes an outcome led approach to financial support, rather than being prescriptive in terms of the types of projects eligible for funding. All proposals are considered by Fáilte Ireland on their merits. Further details of the scheme are available on Fáilte Ireland's website. While the programme is not open to applications at the present time, it is expected Fáilte Ireland will issue a further call for new proposals towards the end of this year.

## **Bus Éireann**

80. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide a detailed report with regard to the Bus Éireann dispute; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14070/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I have spoken at length about the situation facing Bus Éireann, both on the floor of the House and in meetings of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport. The Company is currently losing money. These losses stem from its Expressway services. These are services operated by Bus Éireann on a commercial basis, often in competition with other bus operators. In 2015 almost 23 million people used a commercial bus service, with around 30% of that number using an Expressway commercial service. No commercial bus operator receives taxpayer funding for commercial bus services. The issue Expressway faces therefore is not one of taxpayer funding, but rather a commercial one. I have repeatedly stated my view that different stakeholders have different roles to play in resolving this difficult issue.

First and foremost, the company and its employees' trade unions must agree upon a realistic framework that allows the Company address the commercial issues it faces and restores it to a financially sustainable position. These issues are internal to the Company and can only be resolved through internally focused discussions and agreement.

In relation to Public Service Obligation (PSO) services, I have highlighted how I have already increased taxpayer funding in 2017 by 11% compared to 2016. That means that the National Transport Authority (NTA) has almost €263million available to fund PSO services in 2017. That money can only be used to fund PSO services as provided by operators, such as Bus Éireann, under contract with the NTA.

In relation to the funding of the Free Travel Scheme, I have previously referred to the work underway by officials from both my Department and the Department of Social Protection in examining the funding levels associated with that Scheme and I expect that work to conclude very shortly.

I have assured rural Ireland that the NTA will step in and assist in cases where connectivity is threatened and we have seen the NTA respond where it has deemed necessary in relation to recently announced route changes.

But let me reiterate that the issues within Bus Éireann must be resolved by Bus Éireann and I hope that the company can do so through constructive and realistic engagement with employees and trade unions.

## **Harbours and Piers**

81. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the progress of the transfer of ownership of the Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company from his Department to Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council in line with the Harbours Act 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14067/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy is aware, Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company is designated under National Ports Policy for transfer to Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council. The process of transferring governance and the future operational structures of the port are primarily matters for agreement between the Coun-

cil and Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company. Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council procured consultants to conduct the due diligence of the port company in advance of its transfer to the Council. The Chief Executive of Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council presented the completed due diligence report to Councillors at the Council meeting held on 9 January 2017. The report has raised a number of issues for clarification and the Council has recently engaged a risk and finance consultant to produce a Risk Assessment. This will enable the Council to fully understand the implications of models of transfer and the responsibility that will transfer in financial and other terms.

I understand that both the Council and the port are at present engaging with the risk assessor.

When this process is completed, I expect matters to progress towards agreeing a model and the timing of the transfer.

*Question No. 82 answered with Question No. 30.*

### **Brexit Issues**

83. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the additional measures, especially additional financial and other resources, that have been made available to his Department in an effort to prepare for Brexit, especially regarding ports, airports and the tourism sector; the type of border expected once Brexit is enacted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14223/17]

84. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will report on the preparations his Department is making for Brexit, possible border controls and its impact on the transport industry throughout the island of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13999/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 83 and 84 together.

My focus and that of Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan to date has been on understanding the likely implications of Brexit for the transport and tourism sectors to inform our approach to the forthcoming EU/UK negotiations. In this context, on 23 January 2017, Minister of State Deputy O'Donovan and I hosted an All-Island Dialogue on the impact of Brexit on the tourism and hospitality sector. I also hosted an All-Island Dialogue on transport and logistics on the same day. Reports on the outcome of these Sectoral dialogues can be found on my Department's website at the following *Link*. The All-Island Sectoral dialogues were in addition to other stakeholder engagements in the areas of aviation, maritime, road transport and logistics, and tourism which have been held by my Department.

A major concern of transport operators was a possible return of border controls and the implications these would have on tourism and also for the transport of goods on the Island of Ireland and to our continental markets.

The outcome of these consultations inform the analyses of the Department, including in relation to the implications of possible border controls, and feed into the overall analyses of Government. Details of the type of border, if any, will become clearer as the negotiation process evolves. In the meantime, my Department is represented on Inter Departmental Groups looking at the implications of Brexit from an economic, customs, EU Funded Programmes and Common Travel Area perspective.

A number of existing measures in place will assist in alleviating some of the adverse impacts of Brexit. I have already highlighted the importance of the 9% rate for the tourism sector and the retention of this rate was recognised by the Government in Budget 2017. The reduction of the Air Travel tax to zero, the temporary reduction of employers PRSI and changes to the VISA regime have also been important measures in supporting the tourism sector and these will assist in mitigating some of the implications of Brexit also. The question of additional financial or other measures in the tourism sector, and in the transport sector, is being kept under review and the position will become clearer during the EU/UK negotiations.

### **Airport Security**

85. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the person or body that will undertake the review of the pre-clearance arrangements in Shannon and Dublin airports; and when he expects it to be completed. [8427/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy is aware, in light of concerns expressed regarding the Executive Order signed by US President Donald J. Trump on 27 January 2017, the Taoiseach requested that the relevant departments undertake a review of US Pre-clearance at Dublin and Shannon Airports. My Department, along with the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Justice and Equality contributed to this Review which was furnished to the Taoiseach last month and discussed at cabinet on 28 February. The Review set out the position with regard to the history of pre-clearance, the Ireland/US Pre-clearance Agreement and the Aviation (Pre-clearance) Act 2009, its current operation, along with its benefits for Ireland and potential issues which have arisen in the light of the recent Executive Order.

Based on the work undertaken in the context of the Review, it is my view, and the view of Government, that US pre-clearance arrangements in Dublin and Shannon Airports should remain in place. In arriving at this decision, the following issues were taken into consideration:-

The operation of pre-clearance, a consensual and non-discriminatory facility, where the roles of Irish and US officials are clearly established, does not give rise to any breach of Ireland's European or International Human Rights obligations, including those in respect of refoulement and the rights of refugees or persons wishing to seek international protection in Ireland.

Pre-clearance is a valuable service for Ireland facilitating the movement of people between the two countries. It offers a unique service for passengers, providing them with essentially a domestic to domestic connection. Airlines flying to the USA using Dublin and Shannon Airports are permitted to fly to less congested domestic terminals at US airports, which enables faster onward connections for passengers.

It is a strategic asset for the airports in question, and a key enabler of market growth, which improves our global connectivity.

### **Road Traffic Legislation**

86. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to begin regulating the rickshaw industry; and his timeframe for commencing regulation. [14237/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Dáil Éireann voted to

provide for the regulation of rickshaws, by way of an amendment to the then Road Traffic Bill 2016, which subsequently became Section 31 of the Road Traffic Act 2016. As I have indicated in the Seanad and in reply to Parliamentary Questions, I need to take legal advice on the implications of Section 31 - especially given that it was not drafted by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel or approved by the Office of the Attorney General - and my Department has sought legal advice on the matter.

In addition, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has submitted to my Department proposals for a potential framework for the future regulation of rickshaws. I received the NTA's proposals last month and they will be considered in tandem with the legal advice when received.

I share the Deputy's concerns about the need for regulation of rickshaws, but it would not be appropriate to commence Section 31 of the Road Traffic Act 2016 before (1) the legal position is clarified and (2) I have considered the NTA's proposals on an appropriate and robust regulatory framework for rickshaws.

### **Aviation Industry Regulations**

87. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he will finalise the statutory instrument giving authority to the Irish Aviation Authority for the control of noise levels at Dublin airport; and when he will publish the statutory instrument. [14233/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I refer the Deputy to my response to Priority Question No 1.

### **Sports Capital Programme Data**

88. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the level of applications received for the 2017 sports capital programme; the process that will now take place to assess these applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14250/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** 2,320 applications were submitted under the 2017 Sports Capital Programme. The full assessment process and scoring system for the 2017 round of the Programme is available on my Department's website at <http://www.dttas.ie/sites/default/files/publications/sport/english/sports-capital-programme-scoring-system-and-assessment-procedures/assessment-manual-2017-scp.pdf>.

Over the coming months, all of the applications received will be assessed by officials in my Department in accordance with this process. Once the assessment process is completed, an announcement regarding allocations will be made later this year.

*Question No. 89 answered with Question No. 38.*

### **Olympic Games Ticketing Arrangements**

90. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has received a draft of the report (details supplied) regarding the Olympic Council of Ireland, OCI, ticketing arrangements for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, in view of the fact that the original deadline for the report was September 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter.



[14221/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy is aware, from responses to previous Parliamentary Questions on this matter, on 19 August 2016, Minister Patrick O'Donovan and I decided to establish a non-statutory inquiry to be chaired by Mr. Justice Carroll Moran to inquire into the circumstances and facts concerning ticketing at the Rio Olympic Games. The inquiry commenced its work on 19 September 2016 and was expected to last 12 weeks. In December 2016, at the request of Judge Carroll Moran, an extension to 31 March 2017 was granted for the completion of his Inquiry.

On 21 March 2017, the inquiry's Solicitor contacted my officials to say that the Judge's Report would be circulated to certain parties on 31 March 2017. Those parties will be afforded an opportunity to respond to the Judge and it is expected that 3 weeks will be required for that purpose. The Judge may require time to consider any responses from the parties. Accordingly, towards the end of April, it is expected that the Judge will be in a position to indicate when his final Report will be presented to Minister O'Donovan and to me. Subject to consideration of any legal issues that may arise, it is envisaged that the Report would be published shortly thereafter.

### **Córas Iompair Éireann**

91. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention or that of his predecessors has been drawn to a decision in 2015 of Córas Iompair Éireann, CIE, to extend for six years the terms of the master development agreement in relation to a site (details supplied); if he understands the rationale for this decision in view of the fact serious questions had been raised regarding whether this arrangement was best value for money for a publicly owned company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14066/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The Transport Acts provide CIE with the statutory power to acquire and dispose of property. The CIE decision raised by the Deputy is a matter for CIE and not a matter in which the Minister has a role. Therefore, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to CIE for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Military Aircraft Landings**

92. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on his Department's role in the granting of permission for civilian aircraft to land or overfly Ireland carrying munitions; if he has had any discussions with the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Justice and Equality and Defence with a view to overhauling the current situation regarding the use of Shannon Airport by the US military, particularly in view of the ongoing destabilisation of the Middle East; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14232/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** There are no plans at present for a change in policy in relation to the granting of munitions permits under the Air Navigation (Carriage of Munitions of War, Weapons and Dangerous Goods) Order 1973. There is a well-established procedure for considering applications from airlines for permits to land aircraft in Ireland or overfly Ireland with munitions of war on board.

In relation to each application received, my Department seeks the views of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in relation to foreign policy issues, the Department of Justice in

relation to security issues and the Irish Aviation Authority if the munitions are categorised as dangerous goods. Each application is also sent to Department of Defence for its information.

The primary purpose of national aviation policy is to provide sustainable, safe, secure and efficient air transport services in Ireland, in accordance with Irish and international civil aviation law and policy. The Air Navigation (Carriage of Munitions of War, Weapons and Dangerous Goods) Order 1973, as amended, implements in Irish law the provisions of the Chicago Convention in relation to the carriage of dangerous goods and munitions on board civil aircraft. These provisions are primarily aimed at ensuring the safety of aircraft and those on board.

The foreign policy concerns mentioned by the Deputy would be a matter for my colleague the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, whose Department is consulted on each application.

### **Capital Expenditure Programme**

93. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to outline the plans his Department has in place with respect to Brexit for increasing investment by allocating extra funds to roads, ports and airports to facilitate trade, with particular emphasis on the development of Rosslare Europort and rail and road access thereto; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9538/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As part of the mid term review of the capital plan, which was announced by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, my Department is examining all areas of capital expenditure in the context of challenges such as Brexit. The Department will make a submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform shortly.

### **Transport Infrastructure Ireland Projects**

94. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the results of the review of the Tower Road and Piltown junction on the N24 conducted by Transport Infrastructure Ireland will be published; when funding will be provided to TII to commence works on the safety measures recommended within the review results; whether his Department is in direct contact with Kilkenny County Council to ensure the process of appointing consultants to undertake a review of the Tower Road and Piltown junction on the N24 is concluded as efficiently as possible and that all necessary funding is made available to complete the review process as efficiently as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14230/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As I outlined to the Deputy in my reply on the same issue to PQ 211 of 26 January 2017, as Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

I understand TII was in direct contact with the Deputy on 2 February 2017 and that consultants have been appointed by Kilkenny County Council, which is the road authority for the area, to undertake a review of road safety at this location.

In view of the above, I have referred the Deputy's question to TII for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you don't receive a reply within 10 working days.

## **Dublin Airport Authority**

95. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to the serious dissatisfaction of homeowners whose properties are subject to a buy-out to facilitate the development of the new runway; the lack of meaningful engagement by daa on these matters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14254/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy is aware, the daa has statutory responsibility to manage, operate and develop Dublin Airport, including the North Runway project.

I have personally met with a number of the homeowners involved and I have ensured that these concerns were brought to the attention of daa.

I have since been advised by daa that there has been extensive engagement with local residents groups, the most recent of which included a full day session on 2 February 2017 where the approach to the Voluntary Dwelling Purchase Scheme was discussed in detail with the residents and their advisers. Following this, a meeting between daa's and the residents' advisers was held on 22 February and further engagement is planned to take place shortly.

I have been assured by daa that they are fully committed to meaningful engagement with all local residents groups in relation to the project.

## **Undocumented Irish in the USA**

96. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meeting in Boston with the city mayor and, in particular, his comments regarding the Irish undocumented; and the other issues that were discussed. [14478/17]

**The Taoiseach:** As part of my St. Patrick's Day programme in the United States I met Mayor of Boston Marty Walsh on 13 March. We discussed the bilateral economic and trade relationship between Ireland and US and resulting employment for both countries, current economic developments in both Boston and Ireland, Brexit and the US-EU relationship.

I informed Mayor Walsh that US immigration reform and the question of relief for the up to 50,000 undocumented hardworking Irish men and women was a priority for my visit and I intended to raise it at every available opportunity. I emphasised the contribution which generations of Irish immigrants have made to America for centuries and the deep cultural and economic ties which characterise our modern relationship.

Mayor Walsh updated me on the impact of President Trump's executive orders on the immigrant community in Boston and spoke of his administration's efforts to provide comprehensive services and information. He spoke of the Trust Act in Boston, and his determination to stand in solidarity with immigrants.

## **Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements**

97. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach to outline the matters he discussed with and what he said to President Trump regarding immigration when he met him on 16 March 2017; and if the US President had any particular comments to make on his plans for immigration and the latest judgment on his executive orders. [14479/17]

**The Taoiseach:** I had a very constructive and engaging meeting with President Trump in the Oval Office last Thursday, March 16th.

We discussed a range of matters including bilateral economic relations, Ireland's economic recovery, Immigration Reform, the implications of Brexit and the future of the EU as well as Northern Ireland and the Peace Process. I highlighted the plight of the up to 50,000 undocumented Irish and the importance to us of finding a solution to regularise their situation as well as our wish for a bilateral visa agreement that would allow for future flows.

The President acknowledged our concerns and the positive contribution that the Irish had made to the US. The President did not refer to the latest judgment on his executive orders.

### **Central Statistics Office Reports**

98. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach to outline the detail of and his views on the latest Central Statistics Office report on Ireland being one of the most expensive countries in the EU. [14481/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Regina Doherty):** The information the Deputy refers to was contained in the CSO report "Measuring Ireland's Progress 2015". This is a comprehensive publication and provides an overall view of the social, economic, environment, education and health situation in Ireland. Table 2.13 of the report shows data from Eurostat on comparative price levels of final consumption by private households. The table shows that Ireland had the third highest price levels among EU countries in 2015, after Denmark and the United Kingdom. Price levels in Ireland were 22.5% above the EU average in 2015. Price levels in the United Kingdom were 31.3% above the EU average and in Denmark they were 36.8% above the EU average.

### **Good Friday Agreement**

99. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if a referendum on Irish unity will be planned in the near future. [14483/17]

**The Taoiseach:** The Good Friday Agreement sets out the mechanism by which a united Ireland might come about, including a provision that, if people north and south of the Border decide by referendum that there should be a united Ireland, they should have that opportunity. It is for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to decide to hold a referendum there, based on whether it appears likely that a majority in Northern Ireland would support unity.

I do not believe, based on most recent polling evidence, that this is currently the case, and therefore do not agree that now is an appropriate time to hold a referendum on this, North or South.

That said, in the context of Brexit, I believe it is essential that this fundamental part of the Good Friday Agreement not be undermined in any way.

Furthermore, the Government will seek to ensure that, in the event of the mechanism being invoked at some future point, leading to a united Ireland, all parts of that united Ireland will automatically be treated as part of the EU (as happened, for example, when East and West Germany were united).

## **Disability Services Provision**

100. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if consideration will be given to the creation of an ombudsman with sole responsibility for overseeing the disability sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14284/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy Finian McGrath):** I consider that the statutory functions of the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children, the inspection functions of HIQA, the functions of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in relation to promotion of human rights and equality of treatment under the equality Acts, and the adjudication functions of the Workplace Relations Commission in relation to those Acts, taken together, provide a comprehensive structure of support and advice to persons with disabilities who consider that public sector providers fail in their statutory duties, or who consider that they have been otherwise discriminated against, and provide for appropriate redress in any such instances. Creation of another statutory body in this context would not make for greater clarity and could lead to confusion for members of the public who seek advice or redress.

I would draw the Deputy's specific attention to section 40 of the Disability Act 2005, which makes provision for the Ombudsman to investigate complaints from members of the public about non-compliance by public bodies with the accessibility requirements set out in Part 3 of the Act or about matters contained in a Sectoral Plan prepared under that Part. I would wish to see this facility used more often. It is vitally important that people with disabilities are informed as to their rights on access to services and information, and that they are aware of their right of recourse to the Ombudsman to examine unresolved complaints. It is also crucial that both professional and non-professional people involved in the disability sector are knowledgeable about the Disability Act 2005. In this context, I have been advised by the Ombudsman that his Office regularly takes initiatives to raise awareness of its services, including the provision of an information leaflet on complaints from the sector and direct engagement with NGOs.

## **Crime Prevention**

101. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality to outline the funding mechanisms in place for the installation of closed circuit television cameras for security reasons in rural areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14392/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** I am very conscious of the value that communities, especially rural communities, place on CCTV as a means of deterring crime and assisting in the detection of offenders.

The Deputy will be aware that the Programme for a Partnership Government commits to providing investment in CCTV systems and that I have secured €1 million in Budget 2017 to begin a new round of community CCTV schemes in line with the Programme. I expect to make an announcement in this context shortly.

## **Personal Insolvency Arrangements**

102. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if she will consider reducing the personal insolvency arrangement time period from six to three years for persons and families; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14474/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** Personal

Insolvency Arrangements (PIAs) were introduced by the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 and are designed to resolve unsustainable debt and restore an insolvent individual to solvency, while providing for fair repayment to creditors to the extent that the insolvent person's means reasonably permit.

The PIA is designed specifically for resolving secured debt (such as a mortgage), although it can also include and resolve any unsecured debts. A PIA includes a number of important statutory protections for the debtor. These include the right to reasonable living expenses before payments to creditors are fixed, a statutory priority for their continued ownership and occupation of their home subject to the conditions set out at section 104 of the Act, a right of court review (subject to certain conditions) under section 115A if creditors reject a reasonable PIA proposal by a debtor, a return to solvency on completion of the payments envisaged by the PIA, and protection from other enforcement action by creditors during the period of the PIA.

It is important to note that the Personal Insolvency Act does not set any minimum duration for a PIA. Section 99 of the Act sets the maximum duration of a PIA at 6 years, although this period may be extended for up to a year in certain circumstances. In fact, many PIAs are concluded with a very short duration. Analysis by the Insolvency Service of Ireland of a sample of 100 recently concluded PIAs showed that 43% provided for a period of less than 12 months, while 41% lasted from five to six years. None was concluded for longer than 6 years.

This flexibility regarding the duration of a PIA is an important element which can significantly benefit the debtor. Allowing a longer period can be very important in allowing an insolvent person to put together a proposal which can be accepted by creditors and, in particular, can be sufficient for them to remain in their home. It can allow for a person in financial difficulty, or with temporarily reduced income or working hours, to recover from illness or unemployment, retrain, or increase or restore their earning capacity.

Reducing the maximum length of a PIA from six years to three years is likely to have the unintended effect of denying some debtors the opportunity to avail of a PIA as they would not be able to make sufficient payments to creditors during the shorter arrangement period. The Act's provisions already allow a PIA to be concluded for a much shorter period where this is desirable in the light of the debtor's individual circumstances.

### **Insolvency Payments Scheme Payments**

103. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if she will consider increasing the amount of the reasonable living expenses, in particular for rural families for whom costs are higher; if she will consider allowing the cost of a second car to be included for rural families; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14484/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** The Deputy is referring to the Personal Insolvency Act 2012, which provides that in deciding what payments could reasonably be made by an insolvent person to their creditors, account must be taken of that person's reasonable living expenses.

Under section 23 of the Act, the Insolvency Service of Ireland (ISI) is required to prepare and issue guidelines on what constitute a reasonable standard of living and reasonable living expenses, taking account of differing personal and household circumstances including the composition of the household, age, health, and any disability. Under the model developed by the ISI, which is based on a budgeting model originally developed in Ireland by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, reasonable living expenses are the expenses a person necessar-

ily incurs in achieving a reasonable standard of living, this being one which meets a person's physical, psychological and social needs.

Section 23 also provides that the guidelines shall have regard to the need to facilitate social inclusion, and active participation in economic activity, of the person and their dependants. Thus, reasonable living expenses may, for example, include the necessary costs of childcare or of a car which is needed to facilitate participation in economic activity.

Section 23(6) provides for the Guidelines to be reviewed at least annually by the ISI. The most recent Guidelines were published in July 2016 and are currently under review, including as regards the issues raised by the Deputy's question.

### **Probate Applications**

104. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality further to Parliamentary Question No. 17 of 11 October 2016, the status of the appointing of a probate officer for County Westmeath. [14559/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** As the Deputy is aware, there are 14 District Probate Registries located outside Dublin which are attached to Circuit Court Offices under the control of County Registrars who also carry out the function of District Probate Registrar. The County Registrar for County Westmeath retired in April 2016 and her duties have been exercised by the County Registrar for Cavan with assistance from other County Registrars in the meantime. However, as the Deputy is also aware, I approved a proposal to fill the County Registrar vacancy and a recruitment competition is being conducted by the Public Appointments Service which I understand will be completed shortly.

### **Probate Applications**

105. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if she will ascertain from the Courts Service when the grant of probate will issue in a case (details supplied), in view of the fact the delay is causing undue hardship. [14300/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** The Probate Office is an office of the High Court and management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service which is independent in exercising its functions under the Courts Service Act 1998. Probate functions are also carried out by County Registrars at District Probate Registries in a number of provincial court offices.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made and the Courts Service has informed me that the application for a Grant of Probate in this estate is being dealt with at present and that, subject to there being no queries in regard to the application, it should issue shortly .

### **Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission**

106. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if she or her Department have received any information on the GSOC report on the death of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14312/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** The Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC) are investigating certain matters arising from the case referred to by the Deputy. This arises in part from the fact that my predecessor had referred aspects of this particular case to GSOC.

As the Deputy is aware GSOC is an independent statutory body and the manner in which they conduct their investigation is a matter for them. The last update I received indicated that they had concluded their investigation and that they were reviewing the report. We must now await their final determination.

I have advised the House previously that the question of whether, and if so, what, further action can be taken in this tragic case will be fully considered when GSOC's findings are available.

### **Garda Deployment**

107. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if all Garda divisional areas have a full time crime prevention officer; and if not, the divisions currently without a crime prevention officer. [14372/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the distribution of resources, including personnel, among the various Garda Divisions and I, as Minister, have no direct role in the matter. Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities so as to ensure that the optimum use is made of these resources.

I am informed by the Garda Commissioner that all members of An Garda Síochána promote crime prevention and reduction and that there are dedicated Crime Prevention Officers (CPOs) within each Garda Division. These CPOs are trained to encourage, promote and advise on crime prevention to both the private and business community. These specially trained officers are skilled at identifying risk factors and advise on what mitigating action can be taken to reduce opportunities to commit crime. A list of these Crime Prevention Officers is available on [www.garda.ie](http://www.garda.ie).

In addition, a number of general crime prevention leaflets are also available on the Garda website which provide advice on a range of topics from personal to home security.

### **Ministerial Responsibilities**

108. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if she will clarify the legislation governing the release of results from a Director of Public Prosecutions investigation to a person (details supplied) who was the subject of an investigation; if the findings can be released to this person directly; the procedure for procuring same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14402/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions is a statutorily independent body operating under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach. The Deputy will appreciate that as I have no Ministerial responsibility in relation to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions it is not possible for me to provide the information sought.



## Commencement of Legislation

109. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the details of all provisions of the Assisted Decision Making Capacity Act 2015 which still require a commencement order; if a timeline has been established for these commencement orders; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14406/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 provides a modern statutory framework to support decision-making by adults with capacity difficulties and it is being commenced on a phased basis.

A number of provisions of the Act were commenced in October 2016 in order to progress the setting up of the Decision Support Service. The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) Order 2016 (S.I. No. 515 of 2016), brought Part 1 (Preliminary and General) and Part 9 (Director of the Decision Support Service) of the Act, other than sections 3, 4 and 7 in Part 1 and sections 96 and 102 and Chapter 3 in Part 9, into operation on 17 October 2016. These provisions were brought into operation in order to enable the process of recruitment of the Director of the Decision Support Service (DSS) to begin. The recruitment and appointment of the Director of the DSS, and the appointment of DSS staff, is a matter for the Mental Health Commission (a body under the Department of Health) with the approval of the Minister for Health. My Department does not have any statutory function in relation to the recruitment and appointment of the Director.

The commencement of Part 8 of the Act, which provides a legislative framework for advance healthcare directives, is a matter for the Minister for Health. The Minister for Health, under the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) (No. 2) Order 2016 (S.I. No. 517 of 2016), brought some provisions of Part 8 of the Act into operation on 17 October 2016. The provisions commenced in Part 8 were the definition of “Minister” in section 82; the definitions of “code of practice” and “working group” in section 91(1); and section 91(2). The commenced provisions provide for the establishment by the Minister for Health of a multi-disciplinary group to advise in relation to codes of practice on advance healthcare directives. The multi-disciplinary group has been set up and work is ongoing on the code of practice on advance healthcare directives.

New administrative processes and support measures, including the setting up of the Decision Support Service within the Mental Health Commission, must be put in place before the substantive provisions of the Act can be commenced. A high-level Steering Group comprised of senior officials from my Department, the Department of Health and the Mental Health Commission is overseeing the establishment and commissioning of the Decision Support Service and this work is ongoing. It is intended that significant progress will be made in 2017 on the implementation of the new decision-making support options provided for in the Act. The remainder of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 will be commenced on a phased basis as these new decision-making support options are being rolled out by the Decision Support Service.

## Human Rights

110. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the State recognition there is for religious congregations here; if there are any benefits or schemes for members of religious congregations, for example, a special allowance for full or part time

members of congregations as exists in other European countries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14473/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):** Whilst I have no ministerial responsibility in relation to the issue raised by the Deputy, I do have ministerial responsibility for the coordination of Ireland's United Nations Human Rights reporting, in the course of which issues in relation to the relationship between church and state are frequently raised and I am answering the Question on that basis.

I refer the Deputy to Article 44.2.2 of the Constitution where the State guarantees not to endow any religion. If the Deputy is interested in the entitlements of members of religious congregations under social welfare legislation, he may wish to put down a specific question in that regard to my colleague the Minister for Social Protection.

### **Rialáil Eagraíochtaí Carthanúla**

111. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Tánaiste agus Aire Dlí agus Cirt agus Comhionannais cén líon iarratas atá ag an Údarás Rialála Carthanas faoi láthair nach bhfuil próiseáil déanta orthu; cén líon iarratas atá á bpróiseáil; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [14475/17]

112. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Tánaiste agus Aire Dlí agus Cirt agus Comhionannais cén fad próiseála a bhíonn ar ghnáthiarratas de ghnáth; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [14476/17]

113. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Tánaiste agus Aire Dlí agus Cirt agus Comhionannais an bhfuil aon difríocht idir am próiseála gnáthiarratais Gaeilge agus gnáthiarratais Béarla; agus má tá, cén fáth; cad é an difríocht ama; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [14477/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 111 to 113, inclusive, together.

Bunfheidhm den Údarás Rialála Carthanas ('an Rialálaí Carthanas') is ea clár de na carthanais go léir a oibríonn i bPoblacht na hÉireann a bhunú agus a chothabháil. Ceanglaítear leis an Acht Carthanas, 2009, ar na heagraíochtaí carthanúla go léir a mbíonn gníomhaíochtaí á ndéanamh acu sa Stát bheith cláraithe agus faisnéis áirithe a chur ar fáil don Rialálaí maidir lena n-eagraíocht. Tá dámhachtain stádais charthanúil bunaithe ar an eagraíocht is iarratasóir do chomhlíonadh cheanglais agus chritéir carthanais chláraithe arna leagan amach san Acht Carthanas. Próiséas measúnaithe dian cuimsitheach atá ann.

Tá curtha in iúl dom ag an Rialálaí Carthanas go bhfuair an Rialálaí iarratais tosaigh ó os cionn 1,102 eagraíocht. Tá na hiarratais tosaigh go léir faoi réir a n-athbhreithnithe chun deimhin a dhéanamh de go bhfuil, mar íosmhéid, leorfaisnéis curtha ar fáil iontu chun gur féidir le cás-oifigeach measúnú a dhéanamh ar an iarratas. Ina dhiaidh sin, eisítear litir chuig gach iarratasóir ina gcuirtear in iúl dóibh na leasuithe is gá a dhéanamh sular féidir iarratas a chur chun cinn.

Tá iarratais ó 470 eagraíocht measta a bheith críochnaithe agus tá 208 dámhachtain nua stádais charthanúil, san iomlán, eisithe. Faoi láthair is 70 lá oibre, nó 3 ½ mí, an mheántréimhse ama óna mheas iarratas a bheith críochnaithe go dtí cinneadh ar stádas charthanúil.

Tá curtha in iúl dom nach bhfuair an Rialálaí, go nuige seo, ach iarratas tosaigh amháin trí

Ghaeilge (a cuireadh isteach i Samhain 2016). Tá an Rialálaí tar éis dul i dteagmháil leis an iarratasóir agus ag fanacht ar a thuilleadh faisnéise sular féidir a mheas an t-iarratas a bheith críochnaithe. Ní shíleann an Rialálaí go mbeidh aon difríochtaí suntasacha idir thréimhsí ama próiseála d'iarratais trí Ghaeilge agus d'iarratais trí Bhéarla.

### Courts Service

114. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality further to Parliamentary Question No. 124 of 24 January 2017, the number of the 22 permanent District Court judges that are permanently assigned to that district; the length of time each of the 22 judges sits in the court area that they previously practised in; and the length of time that each of the 22 practised as a solicitor in that district. [14553/17]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Frances Fitzgerald):** As the Deputy may be aware, permanent and temporary assignments in the District Court are provided for under Schedule 6 of the Courts (Supplemental Provisions) Act 1961, as amended. All serving District Court Judges who have been assigned to a District are currently permanently assigned.

The Deputy will appreciate that the only information in the possession of the Minister, from which it might be possible to obtain the facts sought by the Deputy, would be documentation submitted by applicants to the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board which was subsequently provided by JAAB to Government in the course of the judicial appointment process. Thus the additional information requested by the Deputy regarding the length of time each judge sits in the court area that they previously practised in and the length of time they practised law in that district cannot be provided as Section 20 of the Courts and Court Officers Act 1995 provides that “all proceedings of the Board and all communications to the Board shall be confidential and shall not be disclosed except for the purposes of this Act”.

### Special Educational Needs Staff Remuneration

115. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Finance if special needs assistants qualify for flat rate expenses as per other educational staff; if not, the reason for this; and if he will include special needs assistants in the flat rate expenses scheme. [14310/17]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** The legislation governing the deductibility of expenses incurred in employment is contained in section 114 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. The provision dictates that for an expense to qualify as a deduction against income from an office or employment, the expense must be wholly, exclusively and necessarily incurred in the performance of the duties of the office or employment.

For ease of administration, where a large number of employees incur broadly identical expenses which are not reimbursed by their employer, a standard flat rate expenses allowance may be agreed between Revenue and representatives of groups or classes of employees. The agreed deduction is then applied to all employees of the class or group in question. Such an agreement was reached with representatives of teachers in respect of certain expenses incurred by them in the course of their employment.

I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that Revenue has not to date been contacted by a representative body acting on behalf of Special Needs Assistants to advance a case for a Flat Rate Expense amount, but if such a group wishes to do so they should contact Revenue's

Personal Taxes Policy & Legislation Division, New Stamping Building, Dublin Castle, Dublin 2.

It should be noted that any employee who is obliged to defray expenses incurred wholly, necessarily and exclusively in the course of their employment may make a claim to Revenue to deduct such expenses from their taxable emoluments irrespective of the existence or otherwise of a Flat Rate Expenses agreement.

### **Betting Regulations**

116. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of additional revenue that would be generated if the betting tax was increased from 1% to 2%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14366/17]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** I am advised by Revenue that the additional revenue that would be generated from increasing betting duty from 1% to 2% is estimated at €50m.

### **Tax Code**

117. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the existing social welfare payments which are exempt from income tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14376/17]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** I assume that the Deputy's question relates to payments made by the Department of Social Protection, which are not generally subject to income tax. These are set out as follows:

- Child Benefit
- The Back to Work Family Dividend
- Jobseekers Benefit payable to a person in systematic short-time employment
- the first €13 per week of the aggregate of the amounts of Jobseekers Benefit payable to an unemployed person, and
- any element of Illness, Jobseekers or Injury Benefit payments which relate to amounts in respect of dependent children.
- Disability Allowance
- Disablement Gratuity (lump sum payment)
- Domiciliary Care Allowance
- Farm Assist
- Family Income Supplement
- Fuel Allowance
- Household Benefits Scheme

- Jobseeker's Allowance
- Pre-Retirement Allowance
- Supplementary Welfare Allowance

Further details in respect of these payments and allowances are available on the Department of Social Protection website at [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie).

The Deputy may also wish to note that all payments made by the Department of Social Protection are not liable to the Universal Social Charge (USC).

### **Financial Services Ombudsman**

118. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance the reason financial institutions are able to legally appoint receivers to properties in dispute while such properties are being investigated by the Financial Services Ombudsman for final determination; his plans to amend the law in this regard, in view of the fact that it can, and does, take many months for the ombudsman process to conclude; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14472/17]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** I have been informed by the Financial Services Ombudsman (FSO) that when a complaint is made by a Consumer every effort is made by the FSO to facilitate the parties in achieving a mediated settlement with the help of his dedicated Dispute Resolution team. If no agreement is reached, the matter proceeds to a more formal investigation and adjudication, and the parties are issued with a legally binding Finding. The FSO aim to have the Dispute Resolution process completed within 3 months from receipt. If Dispute Resolution is not successful, the length of time taken to investigate and adjudicate depends on the number of exchanges that take place between the parties. A full exchange is required in order to ensure fair procedures, and typically this exchange of documents takes about 4-6 months. Upon completion of the exchange, the FSO aim to issue a finding within 3 months. If a complaint is received, arising from a situation of arrears on a commercial borrowing (Buy to Let/Investment Properties), the FSO will consider the protections afforded to borrowers and commercial mortgage holders by the Central Bank of Ireland's Code of Conduct for Business Lending to Small and Medium Enterprises and the Consumer Protection Code (CPC).

In addition, if a Receiver is appointed by the lender, either before a complaint is made to the FSO, or after the FSO has begun dealing with the matter, the appointment of the Receiver will not impede the mediation, investigation or adjudication of the complaint by the FSO. In that event, the FSO will investigate whether the mortgage deed in place permitted the appointment of a Receiver, and secondly whether it was reasonable and fair for the lender, at the particular point in time, and in the overall circumstances, to proceed with the appointment of a Receiver.

If the FSO upholds the complaint and takes the view that it was wrongful of the lender to have appointed a Receiver, the FSO can direct compensation of up to €250,000 and/or direct such rectification as considered to be appropriate in the circumstances.

### **Student Data**

119. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the number, value and cost of transfer of all student loans that have been transferred by a bank to third parties, including a company (details supplied) for each year since 2014, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14492/17]

120. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the policy of a bank (details supplied) in relation to the transfer of student loans to third parties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14493/17]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 119 and 120 together.

Based on the details supplied the Deputy's question relates to AIB. I have received the following response from AIB:

“AIB has not sold or transferred the ownership of student loans to any third parties. AIB engages with third parties to support the recovery and restructure of the debt where required.”

### **Financial Services Ombudsman**

121. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints currently with the Financial Services Ombudsman regarding a bank (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14494/17]

122. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the number of negative judgments issued by the Financial Services Ombudsman against a bank (details supplied) in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14495/17]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 121 and 122 together.

Section 57 CC of the Central Bank Act 1942 provides that “The Financial Services Ombudsman shall ensure that investigations are conducted in private.” Therefore I am not in a position to comment on ongoing cases.

However, section 72 of the Central Bank (Supervision and Enforcement) Act 2013 gave the Financial Services Ombudsman the power to provide details on regulated financial service providers against whom at least three complaints have been found by the Ombudsman to be substantiated or partly substantiated in the preceding financial year.

Since then, the names of financial service providers who have had at least three complaints against them substantiated or partly substantiated have been published in the Financial Services Ombudsman's 2014 and 2015 Annual Reviews. These are available at the following links:

<https://www.financialombudsman.ie/publications/FSO%20Annual%20Review%202014%20Digital.pdf>.

<https://www.financialombudsman.ie/documents/2015%20Annual%20Review.pdf>.

As the Deputy will see, there were 4 complaints substantiated and 29 partially substantiated against the bank referred to in 2014 while the numbers were 7 substantiated and 30 partially substantiated in 2015.

### **Financial Services Ombudsman Staff**

123. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the number of staff employed at the Financial Services Ombudsman; the vacancies there are; the qualifications of the staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14496/17]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan):** The Financial Service Ombudsman's Bureau (FSO) publishes staffing levels and details in its annual report. It also provides details of its current staffing arrangements on its website. I understand that there were 34 staff employed in the Financial Service Ombudsman Bureau at the end of 2016. This was broken down as follows:

- Ombudsman/Deputy Ombudsman            2
- PA to Ombudsman                                1
- Senior management group                    3
- Adjudication & Legal Services                5
- Corporate & Information Services            8
- Dispute Resolution Services                 15

There were four vacancies which have since been filled through an open competition.

The qualifications of FSO staff reflect the above organisational structure as well as the wider system within which the FSO operates. Qualifications held by FSO employees include legal and compliance qualifications, mediation accreditation, corporate governance, financial services qualifications and general management.

### School Enrolments

124. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide information on the enrolment and waiting list levels for each primary level school in Swords, County Dublin; the details of the factors his Department used in its demographic analysis to determine demand in the coming years; the action he will take to resolve the capacity issue in Swords for the coming academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14283/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** There are a total of 13 primary schools in the Swords school planning area with 11 schools enrolling junior infants – this includes two Junior Primary Schools (catering for Junior Infants to 2nd class) and two Senior Primary Schools (catering for 3rd to 6th class).

The Department was contacted by just one school in the Swords area to advise that they have a waiting list of over 100 children for September 2017. The indications are that pupils on the waiting list are also on the waiting lists for other schools and may already have been offered a school place. The Department has been in direct contact with a number of primary schools in the Swords in respect of their junior infant capacity. In that regard it is understood that up to three schools in the catchment area have capacity and have expressed a willingness to enrol further junior infants in September 2017, if necessary.

The school enrolment position for September 2017 will be clarified when the schools concerned have completed their enrolment process in the coming weeks. In that context the Department understands that further offers of places will be made by schools with junior infant places remaining available for September 2017.

While the situation may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice, the Department's main responsibility is to ensure that the existing schools in the area can, between them, cater for the demand for Junior Infant places in September 2017. It is im-

portant that school size is monitored and that a balance is preserved among all schools in school planning areas to ensure that one school is not expanding at the expense of another school. The Department is monitoring the enrolment position in the area in question closely.

In addition to assessing existing capacity in the Swords school planning area for the coming year, my Department is currently in the process of completing a demographic analysis of the Swords area as part of overall demographic analyses nationwide at primary and post primary level to determine where additional school accommodation is needed. The factors taken into consideration in this process include the analysis of data from a range of sources, including the Central Statistics Office, Ordnance Survey Ireland, the Department of Social Protection and school enrolment returns.

### **Residential Institutions Redress Scheme**

125. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the progress of any measures taken by Caranua to reduce the lengthy waiting times associated with the decision making process as highlighted by the annual report of the Caranua appeals officer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14286/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** As the Deputy is aware Caranua is an independent statutory body and I have no role in its day to day operations. I understand that Caranua has made significant efforts to address the backlog of applications that had built up from 2014 onwards and that arrears have been greatly reduced. My Department has supported Caranua in its work through for example sanctioning an increase in its approved staffing allocation so as to enable it to address the backlog.

### **Residential Institutions Redress Scheme**

126. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he is satisfied that Caranua has sufficient staffing levels to clear the backlog of applications, with some waiting over six months. [14287/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** As the Deputy is aware Caranua is an independent Statutory body and it is a matter for the organization to determine its own resource requirements subject to any necessary approvals being obtained from my Department. I wish to advise that a request from Caranua for an increase in its authorized staffing complement was approved by my Department last year and I understand that the additional positions have been filled. There are no outstanding requests for additional staffing resources on hands in my Department.

### **Residential Institutions Redress Scheme**

127. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on policies implemented by Caranua, including the restricting of awards to a fixed sum, refusing claims for eligible applicants with legitimate claims and changes to criteria that were not authorised through legislation. [14288/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** Caranua is an independent statutory body established under the provisions of the Residential Institutions Statutory Fund Act 2012. Under the legislation it is a matter for Caranua itself to determine the criteria by



reference to which it makes decisions in relation to individual applications and I have no role in relation to that process.

Caranua has received over 5,600 applications and has supported some 4,000 former residents—an achievement that we should not lose sight of. It is fair to say that it is now making a meaningful contribution to the well-being of many former residents.

Concerns have been expressed to me regarding aspects of Caranua's work. Representations have been made to me and I have met with and listened to survivors. I have met with Caranua and discussed the progress the organisation is making particularly with regard to meeting clients' needs and delivering a quality service. I have impressed on Caranua the need to operate in the best interests of its clients and am satisfied that their approach is client-centred.

Applicants to Caranua have remedies available to them, both internal and external, if they are dissatisfied with the service they have received.

The draft Terms of Reference for the proposed review of eligibility for Caranua were published on the website of the Department of Education and Skills on 15 February with a closing date of 8th March.

Once the submissions have been reviewed, the Terms of Reference will be finalised and arrangements put in place to carry out the review.

### **Residential Institutions Redress Scheme Eligibility**

128. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the likely timeframe for the review of eligibility to the Caranua scheme; the number of personnel that are involved in the review; and the stakeholders they represent. [14289/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** The closing date for the receipt of submissions in regard to the draft Terms of Reference of the proposed review of eligibility for Caranua was 8 March last. A number of submissions have been received and these are being considered at present. Once that process has been completed the Terms of Reference will be finalised and the arrangements will then be put in place to carry out the review.

### **Schools Building Projects Status**

129. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there is a delay in the building project for a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14290/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** The school to which the Deputy refers was sanctioned a devolved grant under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme 2014 to provide 2 mainstream classrooms, 1 WC for assisted users and 3 resource rooms.

In March, 2016, following a request for additional funding, my Department increased the grant allocation for the approved works.

A further request for additional funding has recently been submitted to my Department. This request is being examined and my Department will revert to the School authority directly once a decision has been made.

The funding allocated to the project to date remains committed and is not affected by the school's latest application for additional funding.

### **Special Educational Needs Service Provision**

130. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide assistance to a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14292/17]

131. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department will lead the clustering process for small schools ensuring SET allocation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14293/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 130 and 131 together.

The Primary Staffing circular for the 2017/18 school year (circular 0013/2017) outlines that schools with a balance of Special Education Teaching (S.E.T.) hours additional to full posts now have a period until 30th March 2017 to enter into a cluster arrangement to achieve a full-time permanent post (25 hours) through sharing arrangements with other neighbouring school(s).

Following the school led process for clustering of S.E.T. hours, a Department led clustering process will be initiated after 30th March 2017 for any remaining hours in schools that have not been clustered.

### **Schools Establishment**

132. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans for a new secondary school in Edgeworthstown, County Longford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14299/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** For school planning purposes, my Department divides the country into 314 geographic areas known as school planning areas which facilitates the orderly planning of school provision and accommodation needs. In identifying the requirement for additional school places in a school planning area, my Department uses a Geographical Information System to identify the areas under increased demographic pressure nationwide. The GIS uses data from a range of sources including my Department's own databases. With this information, my Department carries out nationwide demographic analyses at primary and post primary level to determine where additional school accommodation is needed.

Edgeworthstown feeds into the Longford school planning area which has three post-primary schools. As with other school planning areas nationwide, the demographic data for the Longford school planning area (which includes Edgesworthtown) is being kept under review by my Department to take account of updated child benefit data and updated enrolment data and also the impact of existing and planned capacity increases in this area.

### **Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Scheme**

133. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details

in relation to a proposed DEIS review scheme; the way in which schools can apply to review; when is the closing date for applying to the review; when the review will be complete; if a school (details supplied) will be considered in this review process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14311/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** DEIS is my Department's main policy initiative to tackle educational disadvantage. The DEIS Plan for 2017 sets out our vision for future intervention in the critical area of social inclusion in education policy.

In its initial application, the new identification model has identified that there are schools in disadvantaged areas, not previously included in DEIS, whose level of disadvantage is significantly higher than many schools already in the programme. Accordingly, we are moving as a first step to include these schools in the DEIS School Support Programme.

Schools included in the list published by my Department on 13th February are those whose level of concentrated disadvantage has been identified as being at the same level as the current DEIS category for schools serving the highest concentrations of disadvantage. This includes 15 new Urban Band 1 schools, 30 Urban Band 2 schools raised to Urban Band 1 status, 51 new Rural DEIS schools and 13 new Post Primary DEIS schools.

Schools which have not been included or upgraded at this stage, including the school referred to by the Deputy, are those which have not been identified as having the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage amongst their pupil cohort, under the new identification process, which is fair and objective.

The DEIS Plan provides for a verification process and any school wishing to seek verification of the information used to assess the level of disadvantage of its pupil cohort may submit an application for same to [social.inclusion@education.gov.ie](mailto:social.inclusion@education.gov.ie).

It is important to note that the school details published on 13th February represent a first step in the application of the assessment process to support pupils in schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage. I am fully aware that there are further schools whose concentrated level of disadvantage may not be at the highest level, but may nevertheless be at a level which warrants additional supports for pupils under DEIS.

However, as noted in the DEIS Plan, the implementation of a new objective central data-based model of identifying levels of disadvantage within school populations will be followed by a further programme of work to create a more dynamic model where levels of resource more accurately follow the levels of need identified by that model.

Once this work has been completed, consideration will be given to extending DEIS supports to a further group of schools as resources permit.

In delivering on the DEIS Plan 2017 we must be conscious that there are ongoing changes in demographics which may be more marked in some areas than others. Populations in some areas have changed considerably since schools were originally evaluated for inclusion in DEIS in 2006. The new model may reveal that some schools currently included in DEIS have a level of disadvantage within their school population much lower than that in some schools not included within DEIS. If this turns out to be the case, then we must consider whether it is fair that those schools continue receiving these additional resources, using resources that may be more fairly allocated to the schools with greater levels of disadvantage.

It is important to note that the fact that a school has not been included in the DEIS programme on this occasion does not preclude its inclusion at a later date, should its level of disadvantage warrant the allocation of additional resources.

### **School Funding**

134. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of funding for a new school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14316/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department met with the school referred to in the context of an application received for a replacement school. The school was advised that, due to the need to prioritise available funding towards the provision of essential classroom accommodation to meet demographic demand, it would not be possible to progress a major project for the school at this time.

The school was also advised that my Department would work with the school, as far as practicable and subject to the availability of funding, to further improve the school's facilities. In that regard, should enrolment numbers justify the appointment of an additional mainstream teacher, and if it was not possible to accommodate such a teacher within the school, the school could submit an application to my Department for an additional classroom at that point.

### **Schools Building Projects Status**

135. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the extension and refurbishment project for a school (details supplied); the reason the initial target date of September 2018 for the completion of the works and opening of the extension will not be met; when the project approval will pass to stage 2B; when a planning application will be submitted if it has not already been submitted; if he will ensure that consideration of the stage 2A addendum will be expedited as a matter of urgency and that approval to proceed to stage 2B be granted; and if he will ensure that this project will be complete and the new extension will be open for September 2019. [14319/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** The school authority (Dublin & Dún Laoghaire Educational Training Board) was advised by my Department last week, following a review of the Stage 2A (Developed Design Stage) submission, that it may now proceed to Stage 2B (Detail Design Stage) which includes the seeking of all statutory approvals including Planning Permission, Fire Safety Certificate and the Disability Access Certificate and the preparation of tender documents.

The timeframe for the further progression of the project through the tender and construction stages will necessarily be dependent on the timeframe for the school authority and its design team successfully completing stage 2B.

Until such time as planning permission has been secured and the project has progressed to and completed tender stage and the appointment of a building contractor, it will not be possible to provide an indicative timeframe for the completion of the construction stage of this project.

### **Summer Works Scheme**

136. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the summer works scheme 2017 applications will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14320/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I wish to advise the Dep-

uty that nearly 50% of schools have applied for inclusion under the Summer Works 2016-17 Scheme (SWS) which reflects a very high demand. Details of successful school applicants in respect of Categories 1 and 2 under the SWS 2016-17 were announced in April last and are published on my Department's website [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

Assessment of valid projects in further categories is now being undertaken by my Department, subject to the overall availability of funding, in accordance with the terms and conditions of the scheme as outlined in Circular Letter (0055/2015), which may be accessed on my Department's website. It is my intention to publish a list of successful applicants in due course.

### **Schools Building Projects Applications**

137. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to an application by a school (details supplied) in Cork city for phase 2 of a building project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14324/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I wish to advise the Deputy that funding was approved in February last by my Department for the provision of a two classroom ASD Unit at the school referred to by the Deputy.

The school authority has since contacted my Department seeking further funding to significantly revise the scope of the building project approved. My Department will be in contact with the school authority concerned in the matter shortly.

### **School Transport**

138. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the detail of the school transport rate payable to a provider, per kilometre, per child; and the way this compares with the grant payable to parents to transport their children the same distance to school. [14330/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan):** School transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

Currently over 115,000 children, including almost 12,000 children with special educational needs, are being transported in over 4,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres annually.

It is a matter for Bus Éireann to procure contractors to provide services for school transport purposes. Bus Éireann is obliged to tender all works, goods and services in line with the European Directives on public procurement, which includes school transport services performed by contractors under the School Transport Scheme.

It is a matter for each tenderer to decide what price they wish to quote for the work concerned taking into consideration their operating costs over the course of the contract period. There is no set hourly or mileage rate.

Research carried out in the context of the Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme showed that the annual unit cost per pupil for the provision of school transport was some €1,000 and €950 for primary and post-primary children respectively.

The unit cost per pupil referred to represents the average unit costs and was calculated by reference to total expenditure on the relevant element of the Scheme and the number of children travelling.

An eligible child for whom no transport service is available may, following an application for transport within the prescribed time limits, receive a Remote Area Grant (RAG) towards the cost of private transport arrangements.

The rate of grant is calculated by reference to the distance from and attendance level at the school; the maximum grant payable amounts to €933.30 per school year.

### **School Management**

139. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps he has taken to restore the cutbacks to posts of responsibility in primary and second level education. [14364/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** It is widely accepted that the quality of school leadership is a key determinant of school effectiveness and the achievement of good learning outcomes. Indeed international research indicates that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.

Budget 2016 provided 250 posts to second level schools to enable Deputy Principals to be more fully available to assist the school principal with the leadership of the school. At primary level Budget 2016 provided for additional release days for teaching principals to range between 15 and 25 days depending on the size of the school.

Budget 2017 has provided for the equivalent of 170 additional posts to second level schools to employ an additional Deputy Principal to assist the school principal with the leadership of the school. With effect from September 2017, schools with pupil enrolment in excess of 700 will be allocated additional Deputy Principal posts.

Budget 2017 also provides for the commencement of the restoration of middle management posts in both the primary and post-primary sector.

The recently established Centre for School Leadership (CSL) is a collaboration between my Department and the representative professional bodies for school principals. It has been created to offer professional and practical support to schools leaders. This support structure for leadership teams in schools will attempt to ensure that school leaders have opportunities to access, share and create knowledge and experience within their leadership roles. The work of the Centre draws on best international practice and research in the professional development of school leaders. Priorities for the Centre include a new postgraduate qualification for aspiring school leaders, a mentoring programme for newly appointed school principals, coaching support for serving principals, a review and alignment of leadership programmes with Department standards.

Last year my Department published “Looking at Our School 2016”, a quality framework for primary and post-primary schools which is designed to support the efforts of teachers and school leaders, as well as the school system more generally, to strive for excellence in our schools.

The current review of the post of responsibility structure in schools will, in the context of restoration of posts, address the further development of a distributed leadership model.

### Schools Building Projects Data

140. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details of schools that are included in the six-year construction programme 2016 to 2021 in the Dublin Bay north area, in tabular form; and the status of each school stage in the programme. [14371/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department does not hold information on the basis of the geographic area that he has outlined.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department has approved new 16-classroom school buildings for two existing primary schools serving the Belmayne area, St. Francis of Assisi National School and Belmayne Educate Together National School, which will shortly be progressed to tender.

For the Deputy's convenience, I have outlined a list of schools in the Donaghmede and Clontarf areas that are included on the 6 Year Construction Programme 2016-2021, including details of the current status of each project.

County	Roll Number	School Name & Address	School Type	Status Notes
Dublin 13	76085N	Gaelcholáiste Reachrainn, Donaghmede	Post Primary	Stage 2a Developed Design Stage
Dublin 3	81002K	Mount Temple Comprehensive School, Malahide Road	Post Primary	Stage 2a Developed Design Stage
Dublin 13	70020B	Grange Community College, Donaghmede	Post Primary	Site assessment stage
Dublin 3	13815T	Howth Road mixed National School	Primary	Stage 4 On site

### Third Level Courses Availability

141. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of PhD clinical psychology places available annually in universities for each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14375/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** There are no set number of places on these courses and it is a matter for individual institutions, taking a range of relevant factors into account, including demand from students.

### Schools Recognition

142. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details supplied) has secured recognition from his Department; the location of the school; and the proposed enrolment levels and the relationship with a college (details supplied). [14401/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** There are currently seven post-primary schools serving the Lucan school planning area.

Demographic data for this area and the surrounding school planning areas overall, indicates that demand for post-primary pupil places over the last number of years has increased and is projected to grow considerably over the next number of years to peak in 2025. This indicates that the level of pupil intake at post-primary level in Lucan is likely to continue at or close to the current level and therefore it was deemed prudent by my Department to plan additional provision in the Lucan school planning area on this basis.

As a result of the patronage assessment process for the nine new post-primary schools due to open in September 2017 and September 2018, Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB), with Scoil Sínead Ltd as Trustee Partner, was appointed as patron of the new 1,000 pupil non-designated Community College to serve the Lucan school planning area.

As part of this process, the parental demand submitted in support of each patron's application was assessed and in this regard I am satisfied that the level of parental demand for a post-primary school for the Lucan area supports a viable school which will not displace pupils from existing schools.

It is intended that the permanent site for the school will be located in the Clonburris Strategic Development Zone area. Officials in my Department are currently engaging with officials in South Dublin County Council in this regard. The school will open in suitable interim accommodation in September 2017 as scheduled pending completion of construction of its permanent building.

The 1,000 pupil post-primary school, Kishoge Community College, opened in 2014 to cater for the increase in demand for post-primary provision in the Lucan area identified by my Department. This school is currently in its third year of operation and the establishment of the new Community College this September is intended to enhance provision at post-primary level within the Lucan area. It is my Department's view that the establishment of the new school will not impact on the future development of Kishoge Community College.

### **Schools Amalgamation**

143. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details of the communications issued by his Department to the trustees of the three amalgamating schools (details supplied) at the time this process was undertaken; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14463/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** The information sought by the Deputy is not readily available and I will arrange for it to be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Schools Building Projects Status**

144. **Deputy Maria Bailey** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of an application by a school (details supplied) for an extension to the school building; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14466/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** The school referred to by



the Deputy was approved funding for the provision of mainstream classrooms and resource rooms. The school authority has since contacted my Department seeking additional funding for an alternative building project.

Further information requested by my Department has recently been supplied by the school and is currently being considered. My Department will be in direct contact with the school authorities regarding the matter shortly.

### **Summer Works Scheme**

145. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the supports that are available to install 3 phase electricity to a secondary school (details supplied). [14491/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the most appropriate funding stream for the works referred to is the Summer Works Scheme (SWS). The SWS is designed to allow post primary schools to carry out small and medium scale building works that will improve and upgrade existing school buildings. This scheme is additional to other capital funding schemes that are operated by my Department such as the Additional Accommodation scheme and Emergency Works scheme i.e. for projects of such urgency that they would prevent some or all of the school from opening.

The current SWS is being applied on a multi-annual basis for the years 2016 and 2017. Nearly 50% of schools have applied for inclusion under the current SWS which reflects a very high demand. We are therefore, unfortunately, not accepting further applications at this time.

### **Special Educational Needs**

146. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on a matter (details supplied); his plans going forward; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14498/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** The number of special classes has more than doubled, from 548 in 2011 to 1153 across the country now, of which 889 are special Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classes. The number of special classes at post-primary level has doubled in the past five years and continues to rise rapidly.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is the body responsible for organising and planning provision for children with Special Educational Needs, including establishing special classes in mainstream primary and post primary schools. The NCSE has informed my Department that, in general, they are satisfied that there are sufficient ASD special class placements to meet existing demand.

Careful evaluation needs to be carried out before any policy decision is considered to give the Department or the NCSE the power to compel a school to open a special class or an ASD unit. In particular, there should be convincing evidence that the school system in an area is failing to make provision for ASD students before any such move should be considered.

However, it should not be presumed that there should be a special class placement in post primary school for every child that leaves a special class in primary school as many of these children should be able to consider transferring to mainstream or special schools as appropriate.

In many cases, refusal to open classes arises because the school has either no space; is cur-

rently full; is awaiting a new building or renovation of existing buildings or rooms, or cannot access suitably trained teachers. Where the difficulties are infrastructural or relate to the availability of suitably trained teachers or SNAs, it is clearly preferable that my Department would work to ensure that these difficulties are addressed and overcome.

I will continue to work with my officials to address all issues in this area, supporting children with special educational needs is a big priority for my Department and this will continue to inform all actions in this important area.

### **Education Policy**

147. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if consultations will be carried out with children and young persons, parents and the wider community with regard to the new plan for reconfiguration of the denominational school system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14508/17]

148. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if an independent mechanism will be established, with the necessary resources, that will act transparently to oversee the transfer of patronage and the reconfiguration of the denominational school system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14509/17]

149. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if any working group has been established to discuss the details of the reconfiguration plan for primary schools; and if so, the details of the membership of this group and its terms of reference. [14510/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 147 to 149, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy will be aware I have announced new plans aimed at providing more multi-denominational and non-denominational schools across the country, in line with the choices of families and school communities and the Programme for Government commitment in this area.

This will involve the Education and Training Boards in the initial phase, as the State's local education authorities, identifying areas where there is likely to be demand for greater diversity and they will work with pre-school services to establish evidence of this demand among the cohort of pre-school parents.

I believe that the Education and Training Boards, as the State's local education authority, is precisely the right organisation to undertake the consultation with pre-school parents in this process. One of the criticisms of the last process was that it did not take sufficient account of local communities and local stakeholders. The ETBs, as statutory education authorities, present in every county, with representation from local groups on their boards, are ideally placed to carry out this process. The protocols surrounding how the consultation will be carried out will be carefully designed by my Department, in consultation with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and each ETB will submit a report to the Department showing the results of these consultations, including details of how they were carried out in accordance with the protocols.

There will then be discussions between individual ETBs and the existing patrons/landowners concerning the possible transfer of schools to accommodate this demonstrated demand for diversity.

Each ETB will prepare a report for the Department outlining the levels of demand within

their functional areas and the responses of the existing patrons as to how this might be accommodated through the reconfiguration of existing school provision.

In the subsequent implementation phase, where the level of demand for multi-denominational schools is sufficient to justify transfer of a school from denominational to multi-denominational patronage, a process will commence to give effect to that. There will be a role for the existing patron/landowner in consulting with local community and school interests and taking into account proposals from different prospective multi-denominational patrons. It is envisaged that transfers will largely be by way of voluntary transfer of live schools by existing patrons.

This new process for supporting transfers of schools to multi-denominational patrons in response to the wishes of local families is based around principles of transparency and cooperation. Therefore, there will be a very substantial level of consultation of local communities in the process, both with the ETBs<sup>7</sup> in the initial phase to establish evidence of demand by consulting pre-school parents and subsequently through the requirement for the existing patron to consult with local community and school interests in proposing to transfer patronage of an existing school to an alternative patron body. In that process, the existing patron will also take into account proposals from all prospective multi-denominational patrons that wish to be considered. I would urge all parties to engage in this process constructively, with a view to reaching solutions to meet parental preferences.

### **School Accommodation Provision**

150. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status in relation to a school (details supplied) which has applied for additional accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14537/17]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton):** I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for additional accommodation from the school to which the Deputy refers. The application is under consideration and my Department will be in contact with the school authority in the matter shortly.

### **Skills Shortages**

151. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the measures being implemented to address a skills shortage in construction employment opportunities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14550/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan)** : The education system at all levels has established a number of strategies to meet the existing and future skills demands in the workplace, including the National Skills Strategy 2025, the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019.

The National Skills Strategy 2025 and the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 provide for the establishment of the National Skills Council (NSC) as a key element of a new national skills architecture. The Council, when established shortly, will oversee research and provide advice on the prioritisation of identified skills needs and how to secure the delivery of identified needs.

As part of this new skills architecture, nine Regional Skills Fora were established in 2016 with a view to providing an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to identify and meet the existing and emerging skills needs of their regions.

Employers in the construction sector are represented on many of the Fora.

The apprenticeship system is a major supplier of craft skills to the construction sector. Following a number of years of decline, registrations in the 27 existing apprenticeship trades are rising as the employment and economic situation improves. As economic activity in the relevant sectors continues to strengthen, registrations are forecast to continue to increase in these trades in the coming years. SOLAS forecast that registrations will increase to 3,390 in 2016, 4,219 in 2017 and 5,089 in 2018. Both the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 and the National Skills Strategy 2025 contain specific measures in relation to the apprenticeship system.

Further Education and Training providers deliver a range of specific skills programmes for the construction sector outside of the apprenticeship system. SOLAS are engaging with the Education and Training Boards to continue to expand provision in identified areas of skills needs.

A broad range of courses are also available in the area of construction and the built environment in the Higher Education sector. There were 56 construction related courses offered to full-time level 8 (honours bachelor degree) students in 2015/16 and 46 at levels 6 and 7 (undergraduate ordinary degree and certificate enrolments). In total 10% of all HEA-funded higher education graduates in 2015 were from the “Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction” disciplines.

Construction-related courses have also featured in the Springboard+ programme, which funds short form higher education courses primarily for unemployed people. In 2016, a total of 246 construction-related places were approved.

### **Local Authority Funding**

152. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government if funding will be made available to a group (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14331/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** It is a matter in the first place for the group in this case to apply to Kerry County Council for funding support, which I understand has not happened to date. It would then be a matter for the Council to consider the project in terms of suitability, value-for-money and priority.

### **Presidential Elections**

153. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the detail of the announcement on allowing the Irish diaspora to vote for the presidential election by 2025; and his plans in this regard. [14480/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Government recently decided to hold a referendum to amend the Constitution to give the right to vote at presidential elections to Irish citizens resident outside the State, including Northern Ireland. In order to inform public discourse on the significant policy change proposed, an Options Paper is being published this week. The Options Paper will set out the range of options available to give effect to the recommendation in the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution. It will also provide a basis for a discussion on voting rights, which will be one of the topics to be addressed at the Global Irish Civic Forum in Dublin next May.

These considerations will inform the preparation of the necessary legislation for a referendum. If approved in a referendum, the extension of the franchise, as proposed, would require modernisation of the voter registration process and the introduction of arrangements to facilitate citizens to exercise their franchise from outside the State. The Government has agreed that my Department should now commence work to effect improvements in the registration of voters.

### **Planning Issues**

154. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government if local authorities are obliged to purchase houses constructed in new housing developments which are set aside for social housing through Part V; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14296/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There are a number of options open to a planning authority when making an agreement under Part V of Planning and Development Act 2000:

- the transfer to the ownership of the planning authority of a part or parts of the land subject to the planning application;
- the building and transfer to the ownership of the planning authority, or persons nominated by the authority, of a number of housing units on the site subject to the planning application;
- the transfer to the ownership of the planning authority, or persons nominated by the authority, of housing units on any other land in the functional area of the authority;
- the granting of a lease of housing units to the planning authority, either on the site subject to the planning application or on any other land within the functional area of the authority;
- a combination of two or more of the options above.

Ministerial Guidelines on Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, issued in January 2017, advise planning authorities that, subject to the availability of funding, the option they should pursue as a priority is the acquisition of social housing on the development site, by means of transfer of ownership to the planning authority or to an Approved Housing Body.

### **Water Charges**

155. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the position regarding water connection charges; and his views on whether these fees are excessive. [14297/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** With effect from 1 January 2014, Irish Water is responsible for public water services. The Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013 provides that Irish Water shall collect charges from its customers in receipt of water services provided by it in accordance with a water charges plan, to be approved by the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER). Section 22(5) of the Act provides that a water charges plan may provide for charges in respect of the provision of a service connection (within the meaning of the Water Services Act 2007) to, or in respect of, a premises.

In its decision on Irish Water's Water Charges Plan, published in October 2014, the CER stated that, until it made a decision on Irish Water's new connection charges, Irish Water should

continue to apply the rates charged by the local authorities at 31 December 2013. In its Water Charges Plan Decision Paper of 5 March 2015, the CER published a list of the areas that it would be progressing, which includes the development of a connection charging policy.

Planning authorities were requested in Circular PS 21/2013 issued by my Department on 30 December 2013 to operate revised procedures in relation to the application of development contribution levies. In respect of planning permissions granted prior to 1 January 2014, planning authorities were advised that the full development contribution charge (where such was attached as a condition of the planning permission), including, where relevant, the portion in respect of water services infrastructure, must be paid to the planning authority in accordance with the terms of the permission.

In respect of planning permissions granted after 1 January 2014, planning authorities were advised that when granting planning permission, they should no longer include a portion in respect of water services infrastructure in any development contribution applied. Such charges would be levied by Irish Water instead. Planning authorities were further advised that new development contribution schemes made after that date should not contain charges in respect of water services infrastructure.

Currently, over 900 different connection charges exist. I understand from the CER that Irish Water is currently developing proposals for a single national connection charging policy aimed at developing a more harmonised methodology for connections to the public water and wastewater networks. A single national policy on the provision of network connection services is a common model employed in other utilities in Ireland as well as internationally. The CER expects to be able to consult publicly on Irish Water's proposals in the middle of 2017 and to make a final decision by the end of 2017.

## **Water Charges**

156. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the position regarding the reimbursement of Irish Water customers who are solely connected to a sewerage system and do not utilise mains water; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14298/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Domestic water charges are currently suspended. Under the 'confidence and supply' arrangement between the Government and Fianna Fáil agreed in the context of supporting a minority government, the Oireachtas has established a Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services. It is tasked with examining the recommendations of the Expert Commission on Domestic Public Water Services and endeavouring to make its own recommendations. The Oireachtas will vote on the Joint Oireachtas Committee's recommendations within one month of the committee's report. The committee is due to finalise its report by mid-April.

Among the issues the Joint Oireachtas Committee is considering are domestic water charges arrears and any possible refunds of charges paid to date. The 'confidence and supply' arrangement affirms that those who have paid their water bills to date will be treated no less favourably than those who have not. No decisions on these issues will be made until the current deliberative process is complete.

## **Dog Licences**

157. **Deputy Frank O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government if he will consider reviewing the legislation surrounding dog licensing with a view to exempting assistance and disability dogs from the licence fee in order to assist with the provision of such a support, as is the case with guide dogs that are exempt from licensing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14349/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Under the Control of Dogs Act 1986, all dog owners are required to have a dog licence.

Regarding assistance dogs, and in particular dogs kept and wholly or mainly used for the purpose of guiding a blind person or a person whose eyesight is so defective that he/she is unable to find his/her way without guidance, the Control of Dogs Act 1986 and the Control of Dogs Regulations 1998 provide for licensing and muzzling exemptions in such cases. The Control of Dogs legislation does not extend to any other matters relating to assistance dogs.

I have no plans to amend the Control of Dogs Acts 1986 to 2010 in respect of this matter.

### **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme**

158. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the reason the age profile of an area is not factored into SICAP provision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14400/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department's Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) aims to tackle poverty, social exclusion and long-term unemployment through local engagement and partnership between disadvantaged individuals, community organisations, public sector agencies and other stakeholders.

The SICAP target groups are:

- Children and Families from Disadvantaged Areas
- Lone Parents
- New Communities (including Refugees/Asylum Seekers)
- People living in Disadvantaged Communities
- People with Disabilities
- Roma
- The Unemployed (including those not on the Live Register)
- Travellers
- Young Unemployed People from Disadvantaged areas (including young people aged 15-24 who are not in employment, education or training)
- Low income workers and families.

SICAP allocations are informed by a number of factors including the general exchequer allocation to the Programme and the application of the Resource Allocation Model (RAM) for

each area.

The Resource Allocation Model (RAM) allows the population and deprivation levels of all Local Community Development Committee areas to be examined in a consistent manner across the country. This model is based on the Pobal HP Deprivation Index which defines the relative disadvantage of a particular geographic area using data compiled from the 2011 Census. There are approximately 18,400 small areas across the country, which consist of 100 households, and each area is given a relative index score to indicate its level of affluence or deprivation. The index provides a score which allows the direct comparison of all census areas, down to the smallest CSO component. Three sets of data are used to calculate the relative index score – demographic profile, which includes indicators such as the percentage of the population aged under 15 or over 64 years of age, as well as social class composition and labour market situation. However, in general, SICAP is focussed on providing supports to people of working age, to assist them to get a foothold in the labour market.

### **Housing Issues**

159. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government the number of improvement and prohibition notices served by each local authority over the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14404/17]

**Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Minimum standards for rental accommodation are prescribed in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2017. All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties comply with these regulations and responsibility for the enforcement of the regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

Following enactment of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, local authorities have a strengthened legislative framework available to them which provides for the issuing of Improvement Notices and Prohibition Notices where landlords are in breach of their obligations. Fines for non-compliance with the regulations were also increased; the maximum fine increased from €3,000 to €5,000 and the fine for each day of a continuing offence increased from €250 to €400.

Information in relation to where notices were served on landlords for improvements to be carried out, as well as legal actions initiated, can be found on my Department's website at: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/house-building-and-private-rented/private-housing-market-statistics>.

My Department does not collate information regarding prohibition notices.

### **Money Advice and Budgeting Service Remit**

160. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is considering reconfiguring the Money Advice and Budgeting Service; if so, the details of these changes, including the number and location of branches for which closure is being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14313/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Citizens Information Board (CIB), which has statutory responsibility for the Money Advice & Budgeting Service (MABS) and the Citizens Information Services (CIS), decided, on 15 February 2017, to restructure the



governance arrangements of these services. The Citizens Information Board (CIB) assures me that there will be no job losses, no closure of services, no change to service delivery locations and no change to the terms and conditions of serving staff during the lifetime of the restructuring programme. Most importantly, there will be no disruption to CIS and MABS services for those who use them. The decision was communicated by the Board to all CIS and MABS Boards and to all staff on the same day.

The decision comes after a lengthy and extensive analysis of options and a detailed consultation period with all stakeholders on the need for a more streamlined governance model. It is worth clarifying that the new governance arrangements are not aimed at centralising the services provided by CIS and MABS. The restructured governance arrangements are being implemented at local company board level only. The decision taken will simply reduce the number of individual local CIS and MABS company boards from ninety three (93) to sixteen (16). A new regional board structure will be put in place which will comprise eight (8) CIS boards and eight (8) MABS boards.

The valuable work carried out by the employees and volunteers working in CIS services and the employees of MABS services will continue as heretofore. A more streamlined governance structure will result in a more targeted use of valuable staff resources, re-directed to increased front line service delivery, made possible by reduction in the current significant administrative burden associated with maintaining ninety three (93) individual companies nationwide.

The changes will bring the CIS and MABS organisations more into line with modern public service governance guidelines and requirements where significant State funding is involved. In 2017, CIB is set to receive State funding of €54 million, of which €15 million is allocated to CIS services (including €13.1 million to the 42 local Citizens Information Services, €1.2 million to Citizens Information Phone services and, the balance, €0.7 million to central and other supports), and €24.6 million is allocated to the network of MABS services (including €15.4 million to the 51 local MABS, €0.3m to National Traveller MABS, €2.0 million to MABS National Development Company, €3.3 million to the MABS Dedicated Mortgage Arrears initiative, €3.5 million to the Abhaile service, and the remaining €0.1m to MABS central supports).

Following on from the decision of the Board, a Restructuring Implementation Group is being set up by CIB to examine all aspects of implementing the new sixteen (16) board model. This work will include examination of the establishment costs of the new structure and the potential for future savings derived from the reduction in the administrative burden associated with ninety three (93) individual local companies. Current costs are an aggregate of the costs incurred by each of the ninety three (93) local companies on items such as audit fees, professional fees (including legal services), payroll administration and board of director expenses. While cost is not the driver of the restructuring project, some efficiencies are likely to result from moving to a reduced sixteen (16) company model. The main aim of the project is to improve existing governance arrangements and optimise the benefits from operating a more modern, streamlined and customer focused service delivery model.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance Delays**

161. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason it has taken 14 weeks for the carer's allowance file of a person (details supplied) to be sent from the carer's allowance section in Sligo to the social welfare appeals office in Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14377/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I confirm that my Department received an application for carer's allowance from the person concerned on 8 June 2016.

It is a condition for receipt of a CA that the carer must be providing full-time care and attention.

The person concerned was refused carer's allowance on the grounds that she was not providing full-time care and attention. This is because the care recipient was in care facility for four nights per week. The person concerned was notified on 10 November 2016 of this decision, the reason for it and of her right of review and appeal.

The person concerned has appealed this decision to the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO). A submission is being prepared as required by the SWAO and the case will be sent to the SWAO for determination this week.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Household Benefits Scheme**

162. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to restore the telephone allowance as part of the household benefits package. [14396/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The savings arising from the initial reduction and subsequent discontinuance of the telephone allowance meant that my Department was able to retain the other valuable elements of the household benefits package such as the electricity and gas allowance and the television licence. My Department will spend approximately €232 million this year on these elements of the household benefits package for over 425,000 customers. The cost of the telephone allowance scheme had risen significantly each year, as the number of eligible customers grew. At the end of September 2013 there were almost 396,000 receiving the telephone allowance compared to approximately 316,000 people in 2007. This was an increase of 25%, or an average increase of approx. 4% per annum.

The Government is keenly aware of the impact of Budget decisions on the Department's clients, and strives to ensure that the money available is targeted in the most effective way. In Budget 2016, the first increase in the basic rate of the State pension in seven years was given. This increased the personal rate of the non-contributory pension to €222, and that of the contributory pension to €233.30. There was also a €2.50 increase in the rate of the Fuel Allowance, from €20 to €22.50 per week.

In Budget 2017, I announced a further increase in the rate of State pensions by €5, bringing the maximum personal rate of the State pension (contributory) to €238.30.

Therefore, over the past two Budgets, the maximum weekly rate for State Pensions has increased by €8 per week, which is the equivalent of over €34 per month. The value of these increases is significantly in excess of the value of the telephone allowance previously provided.

Any decision to restore the household benefits in full would have to be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations. To date, the Government has concentrated additional resources on increasing the rate of the pension, rather than on the Household Benefits package.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance Appeals**

163. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will pay a full rate carer's allowance to a person (details supplied) in Dublin 5 backdated to 10 November 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14530/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Carer's Allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment, made to persons who are providing full-time care and attention to a person who has a disability such that they require that level of care.

The person concerned was awarded CA from 31 January 2008. CA claims are periodically reviewed to ensure continued entitlement. When her claim was reviewed in 2013 it was discovered that the person concerned had not disclosed all her means. This resulted in the termination of her CA with effect from 5 December 2013 as her means were found to exceed the statutory limit and an overpayment was assessed.

The person concerned appealed the decision. The Appeals Officer held that the decision to terminate CA should take effect from 5 December 2013.

Some of the means not originally disclosed were as a result of an award from a compensation scheme. My Department is currently drafting legislation which will result in awards from this scheme being disregarded as means for social welfare purposes. Pending the passage of this legislation through the Oireachtas, it was decided in December last year, to disregard these means in this case, on an administrative basis, from 15 December 2016.

It is for this reason that CA was re-instated to the person concerned from 15 December 2016.

The question of backdating the disregard will be considered when the legislative position has been finalised.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Fuel Allowance Eligibility**

164. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) who is in receipt of illness benefit is entitled to have their fuel allowance restored from the date they were moved from their entitlement to jobseeker's allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14535/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath):** The person concerned is in receipt of illness benefit since 23 November 2016. Illness benefit is not a qualifying payment for receipt of fuel allowance and therefore the payment cannot be restored.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance Eligibility**

165. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person that is in receipt of jobseeker's allowance and wishes to apply for carer's allowance can receive 50% carer's allowance whilst remaining on jobseeker's allowance; the regulations which apply to receipt of either or both of these allowances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14536/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Carer's Allowance (CA) at half-rate is payable to people who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments and who are providing full-time care and attention to a person who has a disability such that they require that level of care.

As it is a requirement for receipt of jobseeker's allowance (JA) and jobseeker's benefit (JB) that the person concerned must be available for and genuinely seeking work and couldn't satisfy these conditions while also satisfying the condition of providing full-time care and attention to a person, payment of JA or JB and CA concurrently is not permitted.

Section 186A of the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005, as amended, provides for the payment of half-rate CA and subsection 186A(5)(d)(ii) prohibits its payment with JA or JB.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Benefit Eligibility**

166. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to improve the carer's benefit scheme, with particular reference to the need to extend the time period of 104 weeks, in view of the fact this scheme has been particularly beneficial for many parents that have employment opportunities and whereby flexible working arrangements are available; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that this scheme is helpful to parents with a child with a disability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14549/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The carer's benefit scheme provides income support to full-time carers who leave the workforce temporarily to provide care and thereby assist in maintaining care recipients in the community. This, and other care-related supports, such as the carer's allowance payment and the carer's support grant provide recognition and support for the valuable role of carers.

The duration of carer's benefit is aligned with the duration of carer's leave, available under the Carer's Leave Act, 2001. The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation have responsibility for the Carer's Leave Act.

The 104 week duration represents a reasonable length of time to support a carer's temporary absence from work and the Government has no plans currently to increase the duration of carer's leave or benefit.

Where care is provided beyond the period of entitlement to carers benefit, the means tested carer's allowance is available for those who are in need of income support. There may also be an entitlement to carers support grant if the conditions are met. These arrangements ensure an efficient use of public funds while assisting those who are in most need of an income support.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Pension Provisions**

167. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason the date of entry into social insurance is used in the assessment of State pension eligibility for women who left the Civil Service when they married and did not make contributions pre-1991; if this policy will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14554/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** There are two State pensions. Firstly, the State pension non-contributory is a means tested pension. Secondly, the State pension (contributory) is paid from the Social Insurance Fund. Therefore, it is important to ensure that those qualifying have made a sustained contribution to the Social Insurance Fund over their working lives.

To ensure that the individual can maximise their entitlement to a State pension, all contributions paid or credited over their working life from when they first enter insurable employment until pension age are taken into account when assessing their entitlement and the level of that entitlement. Since 1961, when contributory pensions were introduced, the average contributions test has been used in calculating pension entitlement. Once over 16 years of age, the date a person enters into insurable employment is the date used for averaging purposes.

Using another date would require legislative provision, and introducing such legislation would mean a number of decisions would have to be made, notably (a) what date should be used (preferably it would be a date that was not considered arbitrary)? (b) would the contributions paid before that date be ignored in the calculation of the yearly average, and would there be relief for such pensioners if this change reduced their entitlements? and (c) if there was a significant net benefit for pensioners as a result of this change, what would be the source of that funding (e.g. higher PRSI/taxes, or a lower core rate of the pension generally)?

The ‘marriage bar’ describes a rule that existed in most of the public service and some private sector employments, where women were required to leave their employment upon marriage. This practice was abolished in 1973 when Ireland joined the EEC. As it was a rule rather than law, married women affected by it could take up other employment, and many did. It is worth remembering that most public servants recruited prior to 1995 pay a reduced PRSI rate of 0.9% and so they are not generally entitled to the State pension. Therefore, in such cases, the marriage bar would not be expected to have impacted on State pension entitlement, as they would not have qualified for that payment had they remained in public sector employment. Instead, by impacting upon their continuing public service employment, the marriage bar’s pension implications, where they exist, more generally relate to a person’s eventual entitlement to a Public Service pension. Any questions regarding this issue are a matter for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Where someone does not qualify for a full rate contributory pension there are supports available in the overall State pension system which assists qualification for a contributory payment, based on factors such as the contributions made by their spouse, and/or other factors likely to impact upon their needs. These include –

- The Homemaker’s scheme, which was introduced to make qualification for State pension (contributory) easier for those who take time out of the workforce for caring duties. This applies to periods following the introduction of that scheme in 1994.

- Widows generally qualify for a full-rate Widows Contributory Pension.

- Increases for Qualified Adults.

- Credits for periods of unemployment and illness.

For those with insufficient contributions to meet the requirements for a State pension (contributory), they may qualify for a means tested State pension (non-contributory), the maximum personal rate for which is €227 (over 95% of the maximum rate of the contributory pension).

I know my office received this query from your office and responded with a reply.

## **Carer's Allowance Waiting Times**

168. **Deputy Bobby Aylward** asked the Minister for Social Protection the average waiting time for a decision on a carer's allowance application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14558/17]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers. This includes ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible.

The average waiting time for new carer's allowance (CA) applications at the end of January 2017 was 11 weeks, compared to 20 weeks in 2016. At the end of January, there were 2,842 CA applications awaiting decision.

Applications for CA increased 20% in 2016, compared to 2015. This increase has impacted on the volumes of applications awaiting decision. Furthermore, delays in processing are often caused by the submission of incomplete application forms or the failure to submit required documentation that is requested on the application form.

The processing target that is set for the carer's allowance scheme is 70% awarded within 12 weeks; in January that target was reached with 76% of applications awarded within 12 weeks. Reducing waiting times is a priority for my Department and we are working hard to make this happen.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Foreign Conflicts**

169. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade further to Parliamentary Question No. 137 of 14 December 2016, the status of his Department's efforts and contribution to seek a solution to this conflict; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14486/17]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** Ireland welcomes the democratic transition which is currently underway in Myanmar/Burma following elections in November 2015. We recognise the positive steps that the new Government of Myanmar/Burma has taken in pursuit of peace and reconciliation, democratic reforms and economic growth. As noted in my reply to parliamentary question number 137 of 14 December 2016, I am however deeply concerned about the plight of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, as well as Rohingya refugees in neighbouring countries, particularly in light of the escalation of violence in Rakhine State in the wake of attacks on police posts near Myanmar/Burma's border with Bangladesh in October 2016. I note with serious concern the report of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights which issued on 3 February, which outlined experiences of the Rohingya community who recently entered Bangladesh from Rakhine State.

Ireland has consistently called for an independent investigation into the allegations of human rights violations by the security forces, as well as the need for the full restoration of humanitarian and media access to Rakhine State, most recently in its national statement at the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar/Burma on 13th March at the 34th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC 34).

At HRC 34, Ireland has also supported the ongoing drafting of the EU-led resolution on the situation of human rights in Myanmar/Burma, which conveys the HRC's serious concerns over

the recent deterioration in the security, human rights and humanitarian situation in Rakhine State. Ireland has also supported the inclusion of this issue in the EU's contact with the Government of Myanmar, including in the most recent EU-Myanmar Human Rights Dialogue which took place on 22 November 2016.

As well as via the context of our membership of the EU and UN, Ireland has been active in raising concerns regarding the treatment of the Rohingya community at bilateral level with the authorities in Myanmar/Burma.

Ireland's Ambassador to Thailand, who is accredited to Myanmar/Burma, raised these concerns with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs U Kyaw Tin during a visit to the country in January 2017. The Embassy continues to monitor the situation closely.

### **Good Friday Agreement**

170. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the status of the setting up of and operation of the proposed civic advisory panel, as mooted in the Fresh Start Agreement; if he is satisfied that the remit of this panel is sufficient to address the issue of civic engagement set out in the Good Friday Agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14487/17]

172. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the efforts that have been made by his Department to ensure that those engaged in political and community activism beyond those guaranteed representation under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement have their positions acknowledged and represented within Northern Ireland; his views on whether powersharing in its current form inhibits groups such as these achieving political representation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14489/17]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 170 and 172 together.

The Good Friday Agreement provided for the establishment of a civic forum to act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues in Northern Ireland. A civic forum was set up in 2000 and met on a number of occasions but was suspended following the collapse of the political institutions in October 2002. Following the restoration of devolved government in 2007 a review of the Forum was announced by the new Executive but was not re-established.

In addressing outstanding commitments, the parties to the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 agreed that it was important that civic voices be heard and their views considered in relation to key social, cultural and economic issues. A new model was envisaged through the establishment of a compact civic advisory panel, to meet regularly and to advise the Northern Ireland Executive. In the Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015, the parties committed to the establishment of a compact civic advisory panel.

On 6 December 2016, the then First and deputy First Minister announced the formation of such a civic advisory panel. The 6-person panel will consider specific issues relevant to the Executive's Programme for Government and engage with civic society stakeholders. Reporting to the Executive, the panel may also propose subjects it wishes to consider.

The establishment of the civic advisory panel by the Northern Ireland Executive is very welcome as it fulfils the commitment under the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements and, when fully operating, should allow for stronger representation of civil society voices in policy formation in Northern Ireland, as envisaged under the Good Friday Agreement.

In terms of other support to civic engagement and inter-community dialogue, my Department's Reconciliation Fund provides funding to non-governmental organisations, community groups, and voluntary organisations to support reconciliation and to create better understanding between people and traditions on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. The Reconciliation Fund has been running since 1982, and was increased significantly in 1998, following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. As part of the 2014 Stormont House Agreement, the Government committed to guaranteeing the continued allocation of €2.7 million annually to the Reconciliation Fund.

In the second round of 2016 funding, over €1m was announced in December 2016 for grants under the Reconciliation Fund to support 60 organisations working on peace and reconciliation.

In relation to inter-community dialogue, I would also note that the European Union Peace Programme have also, over a number of years, provided extensive financial support for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region. The current PEACE IV programme includes as a specific aim the improvement of cross-community relations and further integration of divided communities.

Finally, I would note that the Government's All Island Civic Dialogue on Brexit provides a further important forum, ensuring civil society voices, North and South, are heard and taken account of in preparing for and dealing with the all-island implications of Brexit. There have so far been two plenary sessions of the Dialogue and fourteen sectorial events. The Civic Dialogue has provided valuable opportunities for Ministers to engage directly with stakeholders across the island of Ireland on the implications of the Brexit process for their sector. The Civic Dialogue will continue to inform the Government's approach to managing Brexit, and the Government is considering the best way through which to continue these valuable discussions.

### **Good Friday Agreement**

171. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he is satisfied with the operation of the consociational powersharing arrangements in Stormont, in view of the criticisms that have been levelled against this form of governance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14488/17]

173. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he is satisfied that the Government is honouring its commitment as guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement with respect to the operation of the powersharing institutions and the promotion of inter community dialogue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14490/17]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 171 and 173 together.

The Government's firm position is that the Good Friday Agreement and the successor Agreements must be implemented in full, and this is reflected in the Programme for Partnership Government. The Agreements, and the principles and values underpinning them, are at the core of the Government's approach to peace, reconciliation and prosperity on this island. The Government will continue to work tirelessly for that full implementation in both letter and spirit.

The power-sharing Assembly and Executive are at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement and an essential part of the cross-community partnership that is the basis of the peace process. These institutions are indispensable for addressing the needs and concerns of people in Northern Ireland, including peace, prosperity and reconciliation.



As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, both Governments have a role to play in supporting the effective operation of the devolved institutions, and in upholding both the letter and the spirit of the Agreement as a whole, in the interests of all in Northern Ireland. In this context I am representing the Government in the ongoing talks at Stormont Castle. The discussions are focused on addressing outstanding issues, including the implementation of past agreements and addressing the legacy of the past, as well as on the formation of a new power-sharing Executive. Both parts of these discussions are essential and inter-dependent.

I expect to be intensively engaged this week in Belfast, working with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the political parties to see the power-sharing Assembly and Executive restored to effective and harmonious operation. As a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement the Government is determined to uphold the principles of the Agreement and to protect its institutions.

In terms of other support to inter-community dialogue, my Department's Reconciliation Fund provides funding to non-governmental organisations, community groups, and voluntary organisations to support reconciliation and to create better understanding between people and traditions on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. The Reconciliation Fund has been running since 1982, and was increased significantly in 1998, following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. As part of the 2014 Stormont House Agreement, the Government committed to guaranteeing the continued allocation of €2.7 million annually to the Reconciliation Fund. In the second round of 2016 funding, over €1m was announced in December 2016 for grants under the Reconciliation Fund to support 60 organisations working on peace and reconciliation.

In relation to inter-community dialogue, I would also note that the European Union Peace Programme has over a number of years provided extensive financial support for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region. The current PEACE IV programme includes as a specific aim the improvement of cross-community relations and further integration of divided communities.

*Question No. 172 answered with Question No. 170.*

*Question No. 173 answered with Question No. 171.*

### **Consular Services Provision**

174. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if assistance will be provided to a person (details supplied) in Australia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14540/17]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** My Department's consular officials, at headquarters in Dublin and in our mission network worldwide, provide advice and practical support to Irish people who find themselves in difficult or distressing circumstances abroad.

However, the Department has no role in relation to immigration or visa decision-making abroad, and so neither I nor my officials are in a position to intervene on an individual immigration case with the Australian government. It is for an individual citizen's immigration lawyer to advise on the best course of action in regards to their immigration case.

I can, however, assure the Deputy that Embassy officials in Canberra are both aware of the specific case raised and have provided assistance to the family, within the parameters of what

my Department can offer in such cases. I would encourage the individual and family concerned to raise any requests for assistance they may have with Embassy officials in Australia.

### Passport Services

175. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans to put additional staff in place in the Passport Office to deal with the large number of applications which are currently being experienced; when additional staff will commence in order to deal with the unprecedented waiting times and the fact that applications are not being dealt with according to the advised timelines. [14542/17]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** There is currently a very high volume of passport applications in the system - over 60,000. Between 1 January and 16 March a total of 191,428 applications were received compared to a total of 155,163 for the same period last year. This represents an increase of over 23% in volume.

The Passport Service is working extremely hard to manage the ongoing surge in passport applications. A total of 230 Temporary Clerical Officers have been assigned to the Passport Service to assist with the processing of passport applications and to respond to customer queries including via phone calls, emails and social media. This is an increase of 59 officers over the number recruited in 2015. The majority of the TCOs are already in place and the remaining officers will join in the coming weeks.

In addition to the recruitment of Temporary Clerical Officers, my Department has requested the Public Appointments Service to assign additional Clerical and Executive Officers to fill recent vacancies in the Passport Service.

The turnaround times for the each category of passport applicant are updated weekly on the Passport Service website. The average processing time for renewal applications submitted through Passport Express is currently 16 working days (our aim is a 15 day turnaround). First time applicants or those with lost/stolen passports take longer because of additional anti-fraud measures and these applications are being processed in an average of 23 working days (our aim is a 20 working day turnaround).

The Passport Service advises customers to apply at least six weeks prior to travelling and to submit their application through Passport Express if they have no immediate travel plans. There are a limited number of appointments available at the Passport Offices in Dublin and Cork for those travelling in three weeks or less. These appointments can be made online.

The Passport Service offers a free email reminder service to holders with passports due for renewal and I would urge the Deputy to promote use of this facility where possible. See: <https://www.dfa.ie/passports-citizenship/top-passport-questions/when-should-i-apply-for-a-new-passport>.

As the Deputy will be aware, we are engaged in a significant programme of passport service reform which will result in greater efficiencies and convenience for applicants. I expect to make further announcements on this matter in the near future.

I will continue to closely monitor the situation to ensure the effective deployment of staff and other resources in order to minimise the impact of the exceptionally high demand on turnaround times for applicants and on customer service.

**Northern Ireland**

176. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the outcome of his discussions to date with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and with the political parties represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly regarding the urgent need to restore the Northern Ireland Executive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14545/17]

178. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the particular challenges and difficulties arising for all of the island due to Brexit are part of the discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and with the political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly regarding the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14547/17]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 176 and 178 together.

Following the Assembly election, I spoke on 5 March with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Taoiseach spoke with Prime Minister May. Both Governments agreed on the need for intensive engagement to address outstanding issues and commitments to ensure the early establishment of an Executive.

As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, both Governments have a role to play in supporting the effective operation of the devolved institutions, and in upholding both the letter and the spirit of the Agreement as a whole, in the interests of all in Northern Ireland.

In this context I am representing the Government in the ongoing talks at Stormont Castle. The discussions are focused on addressing outstanding issues, including the implementation of past agreements and addressing the legacy of the past, as well as on the formation of a new power-sharing Executive. Both parts of these discussions are essential and inter-dependent.

All parties have shown a willingness to engage on the key issues. However, there is a limited timeframe for the formation of a new Executive. In the time remaining, all sides, including the two Governments and the parties, will have to work hard and with a spirit of compromise, to achieve the collective objective of re-establishing the power-sharing institutions of the Good Friday Agreement.

Particular responsibilities attach to the parties who are entitled to nominate a First Minister and deputy First Minister to engage with each other, and to advance discussions with the other political parties, on the formation of a new Executive.

As part of my engagement with the Secretary of State and with each of the parties in the current discussions, I have emphasised the critical importance of forming a new Executive so that Northern Ireland's interests can be represented as effectively as possible in the preparations for the EU-UK negotiations. I very much hope that the new Executive will be in place as soon as possible so that it can directly represent the interests of the people of Northern Ireland in these vital negotiations.

The interests of the island as a whole and protecting the gains of the peace process will remain a priority for the Government in the upcoming EU-UK negotiations and the Government will continue to be proactive in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, including through engagement with the Northern Ireland parties. The Government's All-Island Civic Dialogue is also a central strand of our approach to preparing for and managing Brexit.

I expect to be intensively engaged this week in Belfast, working with the Secretary of State

for Northern Ireland and the political parties to see the power-sharing Assembly and Executive restored to effective and harmonious operation. As a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement the Government is determined to uphold the principles of the Agreement and to protect its institutions.

### **Northern Ireland**

177. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the recent concerns expressed by the Council of Europe regarding the lack of progress in approving Acht na Gaeilge in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14546/17]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan):** The Good Friday Agreement recognised the importance of respect, understanding, and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities.

The Irish Government ratified the Council of Europe Framework Convention on National Minorities in 1999 further to the commitment to do so under the Good Friday Agreement. The UK Government had previously ratified the Convention.

The Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities published its Fourth Opinion on the United Kingdom on 9 March 2017. The Advisory Committee made a number of observations and recommendations in relation to the status and protection of the Irish language in Northern Ireland, which relate to provisions of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent Agreements.

The Committee's recommendations include the adoption of appropriate legislation by the Northern Ireland Assembly as a necessity to protect and promote the Irish language. The Committee also called on the UK Government to help create the political consensus needed for such adoption. The Committee made further recommendations in relation to support for Irish-medium education, Irish language teaching and shared education in Northern Ireland. The Committee also made a recommendation on funding under the BBC Charter for programming in minority languages, in particular the Irish language.

The Council of Europe Advisory Committee report is a welcome and timely contribution to the current discussions on ensuring respect for linguistic diversity and the Irish language in Northern Ireland, consistent with the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

Further to the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, a specific commitment to an Irish Language Act in Northern Ireland to be enacted by the British Government was part of the St Andrews Agreement in 2006. Successive Irish Governments have advocated in favour of an Irish Language Act and continue to do so. Regrettably to date, there has been no agreement within the Northern Ireland Executive to take forward what is now a devolved matter.

As part of the outstanding commitments under previous Agreements, the question of an Irish Language Act for Northern Ireland was discussed on several occasions during the Stormont House negotiations in late 2014. While I and other Irish Government representatives advocated for this commitment being honoured and implemented, regrettably it was not possible to reach agreement for such an explicit undertaking. Nevertheless, in the text of the final Stormont House Agreement, the Government and the British Government, recalling the commitments from previous Agreements, endorsed the need for respect for and recognition of the Irish language in Northern Ireland.

The Stormont House Agreement provides for regular review meetings with the participation of the Government, the British Government and the Executive party leaders. At the last two Review Meetings – most recently in December – I had the opportunity to draw attention to these outstanding commitments, including in relation to the Irish language, and asked that they remain on the agenda for future review meetings.

As part of the current talks process in Northern Ireland, I have engaged in discussions with the British Government and the main political parties on outstanding commitments and the implementation of past agreements. In relation to the Irish language in my discussions with the British Government and each of the parties, I have noted clearly the Government's support for a statutory basis for the Irish language in Northern Ireland, consistent with our support for an Irish Language Act over many years.

The Government will continue to support the Irish language on an all-island basis, including through financial support for the work of Foras na Gaeilge. The Government will continue to work with the British Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland to seek the full implementation of all provisions of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent Agreements, including those relating to the Irish language.

*Question No. 178 answered with Question No. 176.*

### **Coastal Protection**

179. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the action he will take to tackle coastal erosion at The Burrow, Portrane; the way in which his Department's approach to the situation facing residents in The Burrow has changed following the recent ministerial visit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14281/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Seán Canney):** The management of problems of coastal erosion at Portrane is a matter for Fingal County Council in the first instance. The Council must assess the problem and, if it is considered that specific measures and works are required, it is open to the Council to apply for funding under the Office of Public Works' (OPW) Minor Flood Mitigation Works & Coastal Protection Scheme. Any application received will be assessed under the eligibility criteria, which include a requirement that any measures are cost beneficial, and having regard to the overall availability of funding.

As the Deputy is aware, I visited Portrane on 21 February 2017 to view myself the effects of coastal erosion in the area. I met with local Deputies, local representatives, residents and property owners and I was impressed by the level of engagement locally and with the Council officials in exploring options to address the problem. I know that Fingal County Council is working hard to identify an appropriate and sustainable solution to the problem at Portrane in advance of submitting an application to the OPW for funding to carry out works. Any application that is received from the Council will be considered promptly and in line with eligibility criteria of the scheme.

Fingal County Council applied for and was approved funding of €57,800 under this scheme in 2012 to carry out a Coastal Erosion Risk Management Study of Portrane to Rush which included Burrow beach. The funding was drawn down in 2013 following completion of the study.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

180. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on a matter (details supplied) with regard to water pumps in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14318/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Seán Canney):** The pumps at Rattoo referred to by the Deputy were installed as a pilot project and are maintained by the Office of Public Works (OPW) for the purpose of providing outfall during the farming (summer grazing) period, generally for 6 to 7 months of the year. They are not intended for use outside of this period, except in the event of low-lying properties being at risk during a flood event. There have been ongoing difficulties with electricity supply to this remote site, and these difficulties are being addressed. The OPW intends to have the pumps in use again during the 2017 farming season, similar to previous years.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

181. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if progress will be made on a flood risk in Killarney (details provided); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14407/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Seán Canney):** As outlined to the Deputy in my previous reply of 2 November 2016 (PQ number 248 of that date refers), the Office of Public Works (OPW) has maintenance responsibility only for those Catchment Drainage Schemes and Flood Relief Schemes completed by the OPW under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995.

Neither Lough Leane nor the River Laune form part of an arterial drainage scheme under the auspices of this Office and, as such, the OPW has no responsibility for their maintenance.

Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each Local Authority to investigate and address, and Kerry County Council may carry out flood mitigation works using its own resources.

The Office of Public Works operates a Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme. This administrative Scheme's eligibility criteria, including a requirement that any measures are cost beneficial, are published on the OPW website at <http://www.opw.ie>. It is open to Kerry County Council to submit a funding application under the Scheme. Any application received will be considered in accordance with the overall availability of resources for flood risk management and the scheme's eligibility criteria, available on the OPW website.

### **Mental Health Services**

182. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health his plans to increase bed capacity at the Central Mental Hospital; the number of beds available from 2009 to 2016 and to date in 2017, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14544/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Planning permission for a new modern forensic mental health facility in Portrane, to replace the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum together with associated new facilities, was granted in June 2015. Phase 1 of the project comprises of a new 120 bed hospital, along with a new 10 bed Child and Adolescent Mental Health unit and a new 10 bed Mental Health Intellectual Disability unit. I was pleased to secure significant additional capital funding in Budget 2017 to progress this

project this year. A preferred bidder for construction of the new hospital has been identified, and award of the contract is expected to be completed shortly. The HSE estimate that the new facility will open in late 2019. In relation to bed capacity at the existing Central Mental Hospital, Dundrum, I have referred the Deputy's questions to the HSE in respect of the detailed operational information sought for direct reply.

### **Services for People with Disabilities**

183. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the details of his Department's approach regarding recent issues at a disability service (details supplied) in Portrane, with particular regard to the poor condition of accommodation for service users and investigations into reported irregularities in the bank accounts of some users; the action he will take to ensure the most vulnerable in society, who are in the care of the HSE, are protected from such situations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14285/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** The particular issues raised by the Deputy are service matters for the Health Service Executive (HSE). Accordingly I have arranged for the Deputy's question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **HIQA Inspections**

184. **Deputy Clare Daly** asked the Minister for Health the action that was taken by HIQA following receipt of a letter by a person (details supplied) which contained allegations of theft and malpractice at a nursing home. [14295/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The functions of the Minister for Health in relation to HIQA and the Chief Inspector of Social Services are prescribed in the Act, and in this respect the Chief Inspector is independent in the exercise of these functions. Under the Health Act 2007, HIQA is legally responsible for monitoring, inspecting and registering all nursing homes in Ireland to ensure that residents are safe and receive a high quality of care. Nursing homes are monitored and inspected to ensure that they meet the requirements set out by the Health Act 2007, and by the regulations and national standards. If a concern is raised about a nursing home, HIQA reviews all information received to inform its on-going risk-based regulation activities. However, HIQA does not have the legal power to investigate individual concerns or complaints. HIQA does not comment on individual concerns or specific issues.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

185. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be issued with a date for an orthopaedic operation; the reason for the delay in issuing a date for surgery in view of the fact that this is an urgent case; if the person can undergo this surgery in another hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14321/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** 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.

The National Waiting List Management Policy, A standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

186. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when an operation will be provided for a person (details supplied); the reason for the delay in issuing a date for this procedure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14325/17]

188. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when an operation will be provided for a person (details supplied); the reason for the delay in issuing a date for this procedure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14327/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 186 and 188 together.

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.

The National Waiting List Management Policy, A standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Hospitals Car Park Charges**

187. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health his plans to extend an initiative (details supplied) to all public hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14326/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** There is a significant demand for car parking at all hospitals. Consequently, the efficient management of parking spaces and traffic flow on hospital campuses is of crucial importance. This is to ensure on-going availability of parking spaces; free flow of traffic on campus; unobstructed access for emergency vehicles at all times; proper use of spaces designated for drivers with disabled permits; and proper use of spaces designated as drop off points near the hospital entrance.



The HSE has advised that income from car parking charges in most statutory hospitals and some voluntary hospitals forms an integral part of the hospitals budgetary policy and is invested back into services provided at the hospitals. Income is also used to fund the upgrade and up-keep of the car parks, including security and management systems.

Arrangements for car parking generally is an operational matter for the HSE. The HSE has also advised that it does not provide guidelines on hospital parking and each hospital/hospital group implements their own guidelines. I understand that some hospitals continue to provide reduced rate parking rates for long-term patients and visitors for whom the payment of the full rate would cause hardship.

*Question No. 188 answered with Question No. 186.*

### **Speech and Language Therapy Provision**

189. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health his plans to extend the level of speech and language services in the Dublin 24 area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14328/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** As this question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply.

### **Hospitals Data**

190. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients outsourced at St. James's Hospital, Dublin, for the years 2013, 2014, 2015 and to date in 2017, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14332/17]

191. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of emergency department attendances at St. James's Hospital, for the years 2013, 2014, 2015 and to date in 2017, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14333/17]

192. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the outpatient waiting times at St. James's Hospital, Dublin for each of the years 2011 to 2015 and to date in 2017, by year, speciality and in wait time-bands (details supplied), in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14334/17]

193. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients on trolleys at St. James's Hospital for each of the months of 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14335/17]

194. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients on trolleys at St. James's Hospital for each of the months of 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14336/17]

195. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the operating budget for St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2009 to 2016, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14337/17]

197. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the total agency spend at St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2013 to 2015 and to date in 2017, in tabular form; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [14339/17]

198. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of WTE nursing positions in place at St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2009 to 2016 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14340/17]

199. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds operational at St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2009 to 2015 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14341/17]

200. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of outpatient hospital cancellations at St. James's Hospital for the years 2013, 2014, 2015 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14342/17]

201. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of inpatient hospital cancellations at St. James's Hospital for the years 2013, 2014, 2015 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14343/17]

202. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of inpatient and outpatient appointments where the patient did not attend at St. James's Hospital for the years 2013, 2014, 2015 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14344/17]

203. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of theatres operational at St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2011 to 2015 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14345/17]

206. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of times the full-capacity protocol was initiated at St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2011 to 2015 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14348/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 190 to 195, inclusive, 197 to 203, inclusive, and 206 together.

As these are service matters, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Hospitals Capital Programme**

196. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the capital budget or total capital spend at St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2009 to 2016, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14338/17]

204. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the capital projects agreed and funded at St. James's Hospital; the details and an overview of each project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14346/17]

205. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the cost of each capital project funded by the HSE and or St. James's Hospital for each of the years 2009 to 2015 and to date in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14347/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 196, 204 and 205 together.

As the HSE is responsible for the delivery of health care infrastructure projects, the Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in relation to the approved capital projects it has

funded at St James's Hospital for each of the years 2009 to 2016 and to date in 2017.

*Questions Nos. 197 to 203, inclusive, answered with Question No. 190.*

*Questions Nos. 204 and 205 answered with Question No. 196.*

*Question No. 206 answered with Question No. 190.*

### **Legislative Programme**

207. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health his plans to bring forward legislation regarding commercial surrogacy in the near future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14350/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** Officials in my Department are currently drafting the General Scheme of legislative provisions on assisted human reproduction (AHR) and associated research, which will include provisions relating to surrogacy. It is envisaged that the General Scheme will be completed by the end of June 2017. Once the General Scheme has been completed, a memo will be submitted for Government approval, and once approved by Government, the General Scheme will be submitted to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health for pre-legislative scrutiny.

The proposed legislation will take cognisance of the 2014 Supreme Court judgment in the *MR & Anor v An tArd Chláraitheoir & Ors* (surrogacy) case, which found that the birth mother, rather than the genetic mother, is the legal mother. It is envisaged that the legislation will establish a mechanism for transfer of parentage from the surrogate (and her husband, if she has one) to the intending parents.

The intention of the legislation in this area is to protect, promote and ensure the health and safety of parents, others involved in the process (such as donors and surrogate mothers) and, most importantly, the children who will be born as a result of AHR.

It is envisaged that, under the provisions relating to surrogacy in the General Scheme of AHR and associated research, surrogacy will be permitted on an altruistic basis, though, the reimbursement of reasonable expenses will be allowed. However, due to the concerns raised in relation to the welfare of the children, the potential for financial coercion and the risk of the exploitation of financially vulnerable women, commercial surrogacy will be prohibited.

### **Medicinal Products Reimbursement**

208. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health if he will reconsider the decision not to cover the costs of the Respreeza drug taken by sufferers of alpha-1 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14354/17]

221. **Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe** asked the Minister for Health the progress that has been made regarding the continuation of supply to persons of the drug Respreeza; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that this drug has successfully treated alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency; and if his attention has been further drawn to the concerns of persons and their families should this drug be withdrawn. [14469/17]

225. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health the reason the HSE will not fund the life changing drug Respreeza which is the only proven treatment that slows the progression of emphysema caused by severe alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency or alpha-1; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14511/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 208, 221 and 225 together.

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

In reaching its decision, the HSE examines all the evidence which may be relevant, in its view, for the decision (including information submitted by the company) and will take into account such expert opinions and recommendations which it may have sought at its sole discretion, for example from the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

In considering an application, the HSE will also have regard to Part 1 and Part 3 of Schedule 3 of the 2013 Act. Part 3 requires the HSE to have regard to the following criteria.

1. The health needs of the public.
2. The cost-effectiveness of meeting health needs by supplying the item concerned rather than providing other health services.
3. The availability and suitability of items for supply or reimbursement.
4. The proposed costs, benefits and risks of the item or listed item relative to therapeutically similar items or listed items provided in other health service settings and the level of certainty in relation to the evidence of those costs, benefits and risks.
5. The potential or actual budget impact of the item or listed item.
6. The clinical need for the item or listed item.
7. The appropriate level of clinical supervision required in relation to the item to ensure patient safety.
8. The efficacy (performance in trial), effectiveness (performance in real situations) and added therapeutic benefit against existing standards of treatment (how much better it treats a condition than existing therapies).
9. The resources available to the HSE.

I am informed that the HSE received a request and economic dossier from the manufacturer of Respreeza, for reimbursement of maintenance treatment of emphysema in adults with documented severe alpha1-proteinase inhibitor deficiency.

In June last year, the HSE asked the NCPE to carry out a health technology assessment on the cost effectiveness of this treatment. The NCPE completed its assessment and made a recommendation on 9 December 2016. The NCPE determined that the manufacturer failed to demonstrate cost-effectiveness of the drug and did not recommend it for reimbursement.

A summary of the health technology assessment has been published on the NCPE website and is available at: [http://www.ncpe.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/NCPE-website-summary\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ncpe.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/NCPE-website-summary_Final.pdf).

The HSE considers the NCPE assessment, and other expert advice, as part of its decision-making process for reimbursement, which is made on objective, scientific and economic grounds by the HSE in line with the 2013 Act.

The HSE has confirmed that the drug Respreeza was considered by the HSE Drugs Group, which did not make a recommendation for reimbursement on clinical grounds. The HSE Leadership team has accepted the Drugs Group recommendation of non-reimbursement.

Under the HSE statutory assessment process, the HSE is required to set out a notice of any proposed decision to an applicant company. The HSE is legally required to provide at least a 28 day period (from the formal written notice of proposal), to enable the company to consider any such proposal not to reimburse and to make representations to the HSE if it wishes to do so. The HSE is required to consider any such representations in advance of a formal decision.

Therefore, as the statutory process is still ongoing, the company has an opportunity to have further discussions with the HSE.

In relation to the access scheme, the operation of such schemes is at the discretion of manufacturers. As Minister for Health I have no role in the operation of these schemes. There is no provision in Irish legislation for the approval of compassionate use programmes for specific groups of patients with an unmet medical need.

I have previously said that any attempts by manufacturers to link continued access, for patients already being treated with a new medicine, with decisions under the statutory reimbursement process is both inappropriate and unethical. Manufacturers should operate such schemes in a compassionate and not a commercially-motivated manner. There should be no link between compassionate use schemes and reimbursement decisions and manufacturers should be open with patients and clinicians from the outset.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances Provision**

209. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a specialised wheelchair to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14359/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

### **Hospital Procedures**

210. **Deputy Lisa Chambers** asked the Minister for Health the number of surgeries that have been cancelled at Mayo University Hospital over the past six months, by month, in tabular form; and the type of surgery involved, whether elective surgery or not. [14360/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Psychological Services**

211. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons

seen by a psychologist in CHO area 9 in the years 2014, 2015, 2016 and to date in 2017; the number of persons on the waiting list to see to a psychologist; the average waiting time; and the longest time a person has been waiting to see a psychologist. [14367/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As this is a service issue, this question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

### **Mental Health Services Staff**

212. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons, by job title, that were recruited by child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, in CHO area 9 in the years 2015, 2016 and to date in 2017; and the number of posts by job title that were vacant as of 13 March 2017. [14368/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As this is a service issue, this question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

### **Hospital Staff Recruitment**

213. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to appoint a full-time consultant endocrinologist at Beaumont Hospital, Dublin 9. [14369/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Health Services Staff Data**

214. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Health the number of ultrasonographers recruited by the Health Service Executive in the years 2014, 2015, 2016 and to date in 2017. [14370/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

### **Health Services Staff Recruitment**

215. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be made available for the appointment of two outreach nurses to be based in both Crumlin and St. James's hospitals to care for epidermolysis bullosa patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14373/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** In relation to the query raised by the Deputy, as this is a service issue, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Departmental Funding**

216. **Deputy Billy Kelleher** asked the Minister for Health if he will sanction the co-funding of the DEBRA-funded outreach nurse according to a sliding scale; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [14374/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** In relation to the query raised by the Deputy, as this is a service issue, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Speech and Language Therapy Provision**

217. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the number of speech therapists employed in full-time, part-time and on contract by the Health Service Executive by county; the number of persons, both children and adults, awaiting therapy; the waiting times for each county; the number of posts unfilled by county; the length of time they have been left unfilled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14394/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

### **Services for People with Disabilities**

218. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health his plans to restore funding for the provision of bus services for children with special needs to access early intervention services. [14399/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. This commitment is outlined in the Programme for Partnership Government, which is guided by two principles: equality of opportunity and improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.

As the Deputy's questions relate to service matters, I have arranged for the questions to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Disabilities Assessments**

219. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will have an assessment of need done under the Disability Act 2005; the number they are currently on the waiting list with the service provider; the number of children that are currently on the waiting list with the service provider; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14408/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. This commitment is outlined in the Programme for Partnership Government, which is guided by two principles: equality of opportunity and improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.

As the Deputy's questions relate to service matters, I have arranged for the questions to be

referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Medical Card Applications**

220. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Health when a decision will be made on a medical card application for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14467/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** 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.

The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible. The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information was issued to Oireachtas members.

*Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 208.*

### **Mental Health Services Provision**

222. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the current waiting lists and waiting times for CAMHS in the Cork area; the consultant complement for this area; if staff are currently on extended leave; and the steps that will be taken to provide a timely service [14485/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As this is a service issue, this question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

### **Proposed Legislation**

223. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health for his views on a matter (details provided); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14505/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy):** The enactment of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill is included in the Programme for a Partnership Government and is a priority for Government. The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill contains a suite of meaningful measures to reduce the level of harmful consumption of alcohol in Ireland and the harms caused by alcohol.

#### **Separation and Reducing Visibility**

The Bill provides for restrictions on the display, advertisement and visibility of alcohol products in mixed trade retail outlets. These provisions address concerns that alcohol is not an ordinary consumer product but a psychoactive drug that requires a licence for sale. The separation and reduced visibility of alcohol products in the manner prescribed will achieve the



following objectives:

- access to alcohol products will be controlled in premises to which it applies;
- alcohol products cannot be on open display near grocery products, thereby discouraging impulse purchases and the purchase of alcohol products as part of everyday household grocery shopping;
- separate display of alcohol products or closed display in storage units will make alcohol products less visible to children and protect them from in-store marketing techniques.

The options provided for in the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill address the reasonable need for flexible implementation of the requirement to separate and reduce visibility of alcohol products in mixed trade retail outlets.

### **Labelling**

The principle of the labelling provision is to provide consumers with information about the alcohol product and to provide health warnings. The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill provides a 3 year lead in time for the introduction of the labelling provisions. This time frame is considered to give sufficient time for manufacturers and retailers to prepare for these new provisions. The labelling provisions are necessary as part of the suite of measures to increase awareness and knowledge of the dangers posed by alcohol consumption. Research indicates that the labelling measures will be welcomed by consumers. The Health Research Board Report 'Alcohol: Public Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours' stated that there is strong support for more labelling on cans and bottles containing alcohol. The vast majority of those surveyed support including the number of calories (82 per cent), details of alcohol-related harms (95 per cent) and the ingredients (91 per cent) of alcohol products.

My Department considers that the suite of measures contained in the Bill are a proportionate response to address the harms caused by the misuse of alcohol and bring about a cultural shift in our attitude to alcohol. The Bill commenced Committee Stage in the Seanad on the 26 October 2016. The Bill is scheduled to return to Committee Stage in the Seanad during this session of the Oireachtas. In the interim, consideration is being given as to how best this important public health measure can be brought forward.

### **Departmental Funding**

224. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the capital funding that is available from his Department for community groups and voluntary organisations, in view of the fact the national lottery grant scheme is not available in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14506/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** While my Department no longer operates a National Lottery Fund, the Deputy should note that the HSE operates a similar scheme and continues to provide grants to health agencies and other organisations from National Lottery funds. Details of the scheme are available on the HSE website at <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/1/schemes/natlotterygrants/>.

*Question No. 225 answered with Question No. 208.*

### **Medical Card Applications**

226. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if, following his visit to a centre (details supplied), he will advance an application for a community based medical card. [14531/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** 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.

Following my recent visit, the Health Service Executive has been asked to examine the matter of a “house” medical card and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Data**

227. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health the number of neurological specialists there are covering counties Longford and Westmeath to address the needs of Parkinson’s patients; the number of nurses there are to cover these specialist needs; the facilities that exist for neurological care for persons with conditions such as Parkinson’s; if there are plans to increase current services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14538/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** As the Deputy’s question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

228. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the status of the speech therapy service in Athlone, County Westmeath; and the timeframe for the appointment of a replacement speech therapist in this area. [14541/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** As this question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

229. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Health if he will expedite a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied) at South Infirmity Victoria, University Hospital Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14548/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** 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.

The scheduling of appointments for patients is a matter for the hospital to which the patient has been referred. Should a patient’s general practitioner consider that the patient’s condition warrants an earlier appointment, he or she should take the matter up with the consultant and

the hospital involved. In relation to the specific case raised, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

230. **Deputy John Brassil** asked the Minister for Health the status of cataract surgery in respect of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14551/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** 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.

The National Waiting List Management Policy, *A standardised approach to managing scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures, January 2014*, has been developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Medical Card Applications**

231. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the reason persons (details supplied) were refused medical cards and informed that if they were not married and instead co-habiting, they would have received such a card. [14552/17]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris):** 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.

The Health Service Executive has been asked to examine this matter and to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

The Health Service Executive operates the General Medical Services scheme, which includes medical cards and GP visit cards, under the Health Act 1970, as amended. It has established a dedicated contact service for members of the Oireachtas specifically for queries relating to medical cards and GP visit cards, which the Deputy may wish to use for an earlier response. Contact information was issued to Oireachtas members.

### **Basic Payment Scheme**

232. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage he imposed on transfers of entitlements without land as in compliance with Ireland's commitment to do so; the amount that was recouped from this for the national reserve;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14301/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** In accordance with the EU Regulations governing the operation of the Basic Payment Scheme, each Member State has the option to apply ‘clawback’ to the transfer of entitlements without land. Ireland has applied such a ‘clawback’ to the sale of entitlements without land at a rate of 50% in 2016 which resulted in €14,800 being reverted to the National Reserve in that year. Following consultation with the Direct Payments Advisory Committee I have decided to reduce the rate of ‘clawback’ applicable to the sale of entitlements without land from 50% to 20% for 2017.

### **Transfer of Entitlements**

233. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason his Department broke an agreement that the Government and eight other countries (details supplied) decided to apply, that is the taxation on the transfer of entitlements without land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14302/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** In accordance with the EU Regulations governing the operation of the Basic Payment Scheme, each Member State has the option to apply ‘clawback’ to the transfer of entitlements without land. Decisions pertaining to the use of such optional provisions are taken by individual Member States and do not require approval of the EU. Furthermore there is no agreement between Ireland and any other Member State in respect of decisions around the application of ‘clawback’.

Ireland has applied such a ‘clawback’ to the sale of entitlements without land and has informed the EU Commission accordingly.

### **Transfer of Entitlements**

234. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when Ireland sought the permission from the EU not to impose the percentage clawback as agreed in relation to the transfer of entitlements without land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14303/17]

235. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he received the required approval from the EU Commission in relation to the clawback regarding the transfer of entitlements without land. [14304/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 234 and 235 together.

In accordance with the EU Regulations governing the operation of the Basic Payment Scheme, each Member State has the option to apply ‘clawback’ to the transfer of entitlements without land. Decisions pertaining to the use of such optional provisions are taken by Member States and do not require approval of the EU. Ireland has applied such a ‘clawback’ to the sale of entitlements without land and has informed the EU Commission accordingly.

### **Transfer of Entitlements**

236. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

the reason the current leasing entitlements without land clawback exception has been allowed to happen alongside the 50% clawback conditions of sale of entitlements without land, when less than €14,000 was drawn from these clawbacks in 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14305/17]

237. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the suggestion by an organisation (details supplied) that the same percentage, 20% clawback, be implemented on both sale and leasing of entitlements without land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14306/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 236 and 237 together.

In accordance with the EU Regulations governing the operation of the Basic Payment Scheme, each Member State has the option to apply ‘clawback’ to the transfer of entitlements without land. Ireland opted to apply clawback on the sale of entitlements without land.

EU Regulations state that the application of “clawback” must not present a substantial obstacle or prohibition of the transfer of entitlements in a Member State. Ireland is one of the only Member States in the EU that operate a “conacre” system, and widespread corresponding short term leasing of entitlements. In many cases the only option open to Irish farmers at risk of losing entitlements due to non usage is to lease entitlements without land to a farmer who has “naked” hectares to use them, thereby safeguarding their assets. The introduction of “clawback” on leased entitlements would present a significant obstacle to this option.

The option to lease entitlements without land is critical for many Irish farmers who are unable to obtain sufficient hectares of land to use their entitlements annually. Under the Single Payment scheme the rotation of entitlements safeguarded farmers’ entitlements but this is not available under the Basic Payment Scheme where 100% of farmers’ entitlements must be used at least once every two years. A large number of farmers in Ireland depend on the availability of affordable leased/ rented land to use their entitlements. If farmers are unable to obtain leased/ rented land through unavailability or high price they are at risk of losing their Basic Payment scheme entitlements permanently through non-usage. In many cases the only option open to them is to lease their entitlements without land to a farmer who has naked hectares to use them, thereby safeguarding their assets.

Decisions in relation to Basic payment Scheme entitlements including the National Reserve and ‘clawback’ are made in consultation with the Direct Payments Advisory group which includes members of the main farming bodies and agricultural education and advisory services. Following consultation with this group a decision was made to reduce the level of ‘clawback’ on the sale of entitlements without land from 50% in 2016 to 20% in 2017. The group did not express support for the option to apply ‘clawback’ to the lease of entitlements without land.

### **Basic Payment Scheme**

238. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to keep the national reserve refunded in the future to cover all areas currently requiring funding, such as new entrants, forgotten farmers and young farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14307/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** In 2015 the National Reserve fund was based on a 3% cut to the Basic Payment Scheme financial ceiling and provided some €24 million in funding. Some 6,250 applicants were allocated entitlements

under the 2015 National Reserve. There was no National Reserve in 2016 as all available funding of €24 million had been fully utilised under the 2015 scheme. In 2017 the National Reserve is being funded from a linear cut to all entitlements held under the Basic Payment Scheme.

In line with the Programme for Government commitment Department officials consulted with the EU Commission with regard to funding of ‘specific disadvantage’ categories such as ‘Forgotten farmer’ under the National Reserve in 2017 and future years. The Commission has confirmed that Member States cannot use the proceeds of a linear cut to fund the specific disadvantage categories of the National Reserve. The only funding option for this category is natural replenishment, but only after the 2 priority categories of ‘young farmer’ and ‘new entrant’ have been catered for.

Decisions in relation to the funding and operation of the National Reserve in future years can only be made once the position regarding remaining funding following the 2017 scheme year becomes apparent. Consultation between Department officials and the Direct Payments Advisory Committee comprising members of the main farming organisations, agricultural education and farm advisory bodies takes place annually as part of the decision making process for the National Reserve.

### **Basic Payment Scheme**

239. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to put a term limit on the number of years in a row a farmer can lease out entitlements to others, rewarding non-farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14308/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The EU Regulations governing the implementation of the Basic Payment Scheme do not permit Member States to place any limitations on the leasing of entitlements, such as the application of a term limit on the length of leases. In addition any such limitation would be contrary to existing Government policy, such as those contained in the Agri-taxation Review, which provides the granting of tax relief to include entitlements where a farmer leases both his land and entitlements. One of the qualifying criteria for the tax relief is the lease must be for a definite term of five years or more. Applying a limitation to the number of year’s entitlements may be leased, would undermine the extension of the tax relief to cover entitlements and therefore be contrary to existing policies aimed at supporting generational renewal in the agriculture sector.

### **Direct Payment Scheme**

240. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an organisation (details supplied) has been invited to join the direct payment advisory committee; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14309/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** An application from the farmers association named has been received by my Department and is currently under consideration.

### **Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland Funding**

241. **Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a specific scheme has been over-subscribed (details supplied); and if so, if additional funding will

be put in place to meet the demand. [14317/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The “Agriculture Cashflow Support Loan Scheme” was developed by my Department in co-operation with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI), making €150 million available to farmers at interest rates of 2.95%. One of my priorities has been to address the impact of the change in the sterling exchange rate and lower commodity prices in some agriculture sectors. This Scheme is significant in this regard, providing farmers with a low cost, flexible source of working capital, which will allow them to pay down more expensive forms of short-term debt, ensuring the ongoing financial sustainability of viable farming enterprises.

SBCI uses the €25 million of public funding provided by my Department to leverage the total amount of €150 million and, along with the European Investment Fund’s ‘COSME’ (the EU programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs), is providing the guarantee required to underpin the loan’s flexibility and lower the cost of the loans. The Scheme is administered through AIB, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank and they will report on progress to the SBCI on a regular basis, although no official returns have been made to my Department as yet. However all of the banks have confirmed that they have applications up to the amounts available under the Scheme. There may be some residual availability but this will only emerge as applications are processed and loans drawn down.

My Department’s contribution of €25 million includes €11 million from the EU’s ‘exceptional adjustment aid for milk and other livestock farmers’. It was this exceptional aid package which facilitated the Scheme from an EU State Aid perspective, and additional funding is not possible under this particular arrangement. Other sectors, such as tillage and horticulture, were facilitated by national funding under the ‘de minimus’ State Aid rules.

I am very pleased at the very positive reaction by farmers to the Scheme, which has proved that significant demand exists for low cost flexible finance. I hope that the commercial banks will respond positively to this demand by reducing interest rates and providing more flexible terms for cash flow loans in the future. I plan to meet with the Chief Executives of the banks shortly to discuss this and other issues relating access to finance in the agri-food sector.

### **Basic Payment Scheme Applications**

242. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 232 of 14 December 2016, in which it is stated that a review of documentation is occurring, if he will provide an update in this regard. [14322/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** An application under the 2016 Basic Payment Scheme was received in my Department from the person named on 13 May 2016. As I indicated in my reply to the previous PQ mentioned the person named had submitted additional documentation in respect of a dual claimed parcel. This documentation has been reviewed by my officials.

I can confirm that this review is complete, and the original decision on the dual claimed land remains unaltered. As the person named has not farmed the lands in question, it cannot be included as part of his 2016 application which has now been fully processed with respect to the remaining parcels.

### **Agriculture Scheme Appeals**

243. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on whether it is fair and just that a person (details supplied) who won a case in the appeals office, a decision appealed by the Department, has been left in the process for two years with no decision made and no moneys received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14329/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The Agriculture Appeals Office has confirmed that my Department sought a review of the Appeals Officers decision in May 2016. Under the Act only the Director may perform such reviews which must be undertaken in full compliance with the legal requirements and following a detailed assessment of the case to be reviewed. Currently there are a considerable number of requests for reviews being dealt with by the Director. Every effort is being made to finalise the review as a matter of urgency.

### **GLAS Applications**

244. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a decision will be made on an application under the GLAS 3 scheme submitted by a person (details supplied) in County Galway; if the person has been accepted under GLAS 3; if not, the reason for refusal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14351/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** My Department has no record of a GLAS 1, 2 or 3 application being created or submitted for the person named.

### **TAMS Applications**

245. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a TAMS grant payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14353/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The person named is an applicant under the Dairy Equipment Scheme in TAMS. There is an issue with an over claim in this case. The matter is now being examined. Every effort will be made to resolve it as quickly as possible.

### **Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme**

246. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding the review of the disadvantaged area scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14393/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** Under the Rural Development Regulation each Member State must designate areas eligible for payments under the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme. The ANC scheme replaces the previous Disadvantaged Areas Scheme / Less Favoured Areas Scheme. The designation of eligible areas under these schemes to date has been based on a range of socio-economic factors. From 2018 eligible areas must instead be designated using a set list of bio-physical criteria. In cases where a Member State does not introduce this new system for payment, the old scheme remains in place but payments must phase out on a digressive basis.



The biophysical criteria set out in the legislation to underpin the new system of designation are:

- Low temperature
- Dryness
- Excess soil moisture
- Limited soil drainage
- Unfavourable texture and stoniness
- Shallow rooting depth
- Poor chemical properties
- Steep slope.

My Department has commenced work on this project, and relevant technical experts are currently working on sourcing and analysing the data in relation to the new criteria. Department officials have also been in contact with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and DG Agri in the EU Commission in relation to technical issues arising. Over the coming months this analysis will identify areas deemed to be facing natural constraints, which will in parallel be subjected to a refinement process. It is envisaged that stakeholders will be consulted as this process develops.

### **GLAS Applications**

247. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a decision will be made on a GLAS application by a farmer (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14403/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The person named was approved into GLAS 1 with a contract commencement date of 1 October 2015.

During the 2016 prepayment checking process an issue presented on the computerised crosscheck of Department databases. Department officials have examined this issue and the application is now being further processed for payment in respect of the 2016 scheme year.

### **TAMS Applications**

248. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a TAMS grant payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14468/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The person named made a payment claim under the Young Farmers Capital Investment Scheme on 15 February 2017. A number of queries need to be resolved with this claim and they are being examined by the Department.

### **GLAS Payments**

249. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of GLAS payments (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14471/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** Under EU Regulations governing the Scheme and other area-based payment schemes, a comprehensive administrative check, including cross-checks with the Land Parcel Identification System, must be completed before any payment can issue.

To date some 32,000 applicants have received their 2016 GLAS payment and my Department is continuing to work on processing the remaining 5,000 cases with payments issuing as applications clear all of the required regulatory checks and validations.

### **Laboratory Facilities**

250. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to close regional veterinary laboratories; the basis on which decisions have been taken and the laboratories selected for closure; and the impact assessment that has been carried out. [14497/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** DAFM commissioned a Working Group (WG) led by Prof. Alan Reilly to undertake a comprehensive review of DAFM Laboratories (Backweston, Sligo, Limerick, Cork, Athlone and Kilkenny). The WG has presented a report to the Department, which makes recommendations on:

- Oversight and co-ordination of the laboratories activities
- Re-organisation of Divisions and support functions within the Central Laboratory complex
- Options for the future development of the Regional Laboratories – with a view to improving disease investigative and surveillance capability but with the over-riding imperative of maintaining and enhancing services to farmers and
- Human resources management within the laboratories - with a focus on grading structures, career development opportunities and workforce planning

The Department is currently consulting with relevant stakeholders. A decision on any of these recommendations will await the outcome of this consultative process. In the case of the Regional Laboratories any decision will also be informed by a cost benefit analysis of the various options that have been proposed.

### **Single Payment Scheme Payments**

251. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a single farm payment will be issued to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14499/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** An application under the 2013 Single Payment Scheme was received on 11th May 2016, thus incurring a 100% late penalty. An appeal was submitted and upon review it was decided to waive the penalty.

The 2013 Single Payment scheme application submitted by the person named has now been processed. The payment due will issue to the nominated bank account in the coming days.

### **Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme Payments**

252. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he will take to have an areas of natural constraint scheme payment due to a person (details supplied) immediately paid out for 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14532/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** An application in respect of the 2016 Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme was received from the person named on 16 May 2016, processing of which has recently been finalised. Payment has issued to the nominated bank account of the person named.

### **Fishing Vessel Licences**

253. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of Irish vessels that have been fishing within the voisinage area of the coast of Northern Ireland since the Supreme Court judgment of 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14533/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The Supreme Court judgment of 27 October 2016 to which the Deputy refers found that fishing by Northern Ireland vessels within the 0 to 6 nautical mile zone of the territorial waters of the State under the *Voisinage* arrangements is not currently provided for in domestic law. I am seeking to address this lack of provision through the Sea-Fisheries (Amendment) Bill 2017 which is currently before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

In respect of details of Irish vessels which have been fishing in the Northern Ireland 0 to 6 mile zone, this opportunity continues to be afforded to all registered Irish sea-fishing boats, subject to the same treatment as vessels there, as the arrangements continue to be observed by our Northern counterparts despite our current difficulties in reciprocating. The register of Irish sea-fishing boats is published regularly on my Department's website. The most recent register available showed a total of 2,060 vessels as of the 8th of March 2017.

### **Fishing Vessel Licences**

254. **Deputy Willie Penrose** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the legislation that is in place to allow Irish vessels to fish in the 0 to 6 mile zone of the coast of Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14534/17]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed):** The reciprocal fishing arrangements between Ireland and Northern Ireland known as *Voisinage* arrangements allow vessels from Ireland to fish in the area from 0 to 6 nautical miles of Northern Ireland subject to the same treatment as vessels there, with equivalent access for vessels owned and operated in Northern Ireland to Ireland's 0 to 6 nautical mile zone. Following the Supreme Court Judgment of 27 October 2016 which found that there was insufficient provision in domestic law for these arrangements, Northern Ireland vessels have been unable to fish in the Irish 0 to 6 nautical mile zone. It is of note, however, that our Northern Irish counterparts continue

to allow access to Irish vessels to their 0 to 6 nautical mile zone in line with the terms of the Voisinage arrangements.

As appropriate on an issue like this, there has been active engagement on this issue between myself and my Northern counterpart, the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Michelle McIlveen MLA. Similarly there has been regular contact at official level between our respective departments. To date it has been made clear by our Northern Irish counterparts that they remain satisfied that the letters exchanged which underpin the original arrangements are sufficient basis on which to continue access.

### **Litter Pollution Fines**

255. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the number of fines issued for each of the years 2011 to 2016 and to date in 2017 for breach of dog fouling legislation by local authority in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14352/17]

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten):** The Litter Pollution Acts 1997 to 2009 provide the statutory framework to combat littering and include provisions relating to dog fouling. Under the Acts, the primary management and enforcement response to littering (including dog fouling) is a matter for local authorities, taking account of its own local circumstances and priorities. My Department collates a wide range of data annually on litter statistics, including local authority expenditure on clean-up activity and litter wardens, and the total amount of fines received by local authorities. However, it does not collate the specific data sought by the Deputy. Data is available under the local authority service indicators report on the number of fines issued generally, along with the number of prosecutions and convictions, under the Litter Pollution Acts. The 2013 local authority service indicators report, together with previous years' reports, is available at: [www.lgma.ie/en/serviceindicators/2004to2013](http://www.lgma.ie/en/serviceindicators/2004to2013)

Responsibility for this reporting transferred the National Oversight and Audit Committee (NOAC) in 2014, and the most recent report can be found at

<http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NOAC-Performance-Indicators-Report-2014.pdf>

In addition, my Department funds the production of the National Litter Pollution Monitoring Survey Report, which provides data on the level of litter pollution nationally, principal constituents of the litter, and causes of litter pollution. The reports are published on

<http://litter.ie>

Raising awareness of the litter problem, and educating our young people, are key to effecting a long-term change in society's attitudes towards litter disposal but, ultimately, it is the responsibility of each individual to ensure that they play their part in preserving the environment for others through the responsible disposal of their litter, including that arising from dog fouling.

### **Post Office Network**

256. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the steps he intends to take to ensure that rural post offices remain open and func-

tioning, in view of the difficult financial position of An Post. [14398/17]

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten):** The operation of the post office network is a day to day operational matter for the Board and management of An Post and not one in which I, as Minister, have a statutory function.

On foot of the reconfiguration of Government Departments last year, responsibility for the post office network transferred to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

### **National Broadband Plan Implementation**

257. **Deputy Margaret Murphy O'Mahony** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when the national broadband plan will be fully rolled out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14462/17]

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten):** The Government's National Broadband Plan (NBP) was published in August 2012. Progress continues to be made in delivering on this Government's commitment to ensure every household and business in Ireland has access to high speed broadband, regardless of where they are located. The National Broadband Plan (NBP) is being achieved through a combination of commercial investment by the telecommunications sector and a State intervention in those areas where commercial investment has not been fully demonstrated.

A key principle of the NBP is to support and stimulate commercial investment through policy and regulatory measures. Commercial investment since the publication of the NBP, including over the last 12 months has considerably exceeded expectations. To date, the commercial telecommunications sector has invested over €2.5bn in upgrading and modernising networks which support the provision of high speed broadband and mobile telecoms services.

There has been significant progress in relation to broadband roll out so that today, approximately 1.4m or 61% of premises in Ireland can get high speed broadband of a minimum of 30 Megabits per second. The NBP has been a catalyst in encouraging investment by the telecoms sector, which is continuing to expand this footprint.

For those areas that will not be covered by commercial operators the State has committed to intervene and subsidise a network build. The procurement process to select a company or companies who will roll-out a new high speed broadband network in the State Intervention area is being intensively managed, to ensure an outcome that delivers a future-proofed network that serves homes and businesses across Ireland, for at least 25 years.

My Department will shortly update the High Speed Broadband map to finalise the Intervention Area for this procurement, taking into account industry investments that have not fully materialised in the Blue area, along with concrete and credible commitments by industry for further new investments within the State Intervention area.

The timeframe for the procurement continues to be dependent on a range of factors including the complexities that may be encountered by the procurement team and bidders, during the procurement process.

### **Broadband Service Provision**

258. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his views on a matter (details supplied) with regard to fibre optic services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14464/17]

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Denis Naughten):** The National Broadband Plan (NBP) aims to deliver high speed broadband services to every city, town, village and individual premises in Ireland. The Programme for Government commits to the delivery of the NBP as a matter of priority. This is being achieved through a combination of commercial investment by the telecommunications sector and a State intervention in those areas where commercial investment has not been fully demonstrated. A key principle of the NBP is to support and stimulate commercial investment through policy and regulatory measures. Commercial investment since the publication of the NBP has considerably exceeded expectations. To date, the commercial telecommunications sector has invested over €2.5bn in upgrading and modernising networks which support the provision of high speed broadband and mobile telecoms services.

There has been significant progress in relation to broadband roll out so that today, approximately 1.4m or 61% of premises in Ireland can get high speed broadband of a minimum of 30 Megabits per second. The NBP has been a catalyst in encouraging investment by the telecoms sector, which is continuing to expand this footprint.

The High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie) shows the current extent of the State Intervention area:

- The areas marked BLUE represent those areas where commercial telecommunications providers are either currently delivering or have previously indicated plans to deliver high speed broadband services,
- The areas marked AMBER on the High Speed Broadband Map represent the target areas for the State Intervention, which are the subject of the current procurement process. It is intended that premises within this area will have access to services of at least 30 megabits per second when the procurement process is completed and the network rolled out.

The map indicates that Camp village is within the BLUE area and will receive commercial broadband services. The village of Cloghane, Brandon is within the AMBER area and will, therefore, be included in the State Intervention procurement process under the NBP. The area between Camp and Cloghane is also in the Amber area.

Individuals can check whether their premises is in a BLUE or an AMBER area by accessing the High Speed Broadband Map and entering their Eircode.

A formal procurement process is in train to select a company or companies who will roll-out a new high speed broadband network within the State Intervention Area. My Department will shortly update the High Speed Broadband map to finalise the Intervention Area for the Procurement process, taking into account industry investments that have not materialised in Blue areas, together with new industry investments within the proposed State Intervention Area, along with concrete and credible commitments by industry for further new investments within the Intervention Area.

The procurement process is being intensively managed, to ensure an outcome that delivers a future-proofed network that serves homes and businesses across Ireland, for at least 25 years. The timeframe for the procurement continues to be dependent on a range of factors including the complexities that may be encountered by the procurement team and bidders, during the procurement process. During the Department's extensive stakeholder consultations in

2015, telecommunications service providers indicated a 3-5 year timeline to roll out a network of the scale envisaged under the NBP.

The Programme for Government also commits to measures to assist in the roll out of the network once a contract is awarded.

The Department will engage with winning bidder(s) on the best roll out strategy, in order to target areas of particularly poor service, business needs and/or high demand and a prioritisation programme.

### **Ports Facilities**

259. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number and location of deep sea and deep water ports; the tonnage coming through each port for the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14405/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Irish ports collectively handled 50.7 million tonnes of goods in 2015, according to the latest figures available from the Central Statistics Office. The ports differ greatly in size, capability and future potential. Both Cork and Shannon Foynes are deep water ports. The three Ports of National Significance, as outlined in National Ports Policy 2013, Dublin, Cork and Shannon Foynes, collectively handle just over 80% of all tonnage at Irish ports in any given year. All three ports have ambitious long-term Masterplans and capital development programmes. These plans outline the ports infrastructure development requirements over the next 30 to 40 years, to ensure the sector has sufficient capacity to meet the trading needs of the economy.

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) provide yearly details of tonnage of goods handled by Irish Ports. The latest figures available can be accessed on their website via the link attached

*[www.cso.ie/multiquicktables/quickTables.aspx?id=tba07](http://www.cso.ie/multiquicktables/quickTables.aspx?id=tba07).*

### **Sports Capital Programme**

260. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the action his Department will take in assisting the community in Lusk and its environs in achieving their goals following an analysis of the Lusk Community Sports Plan 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14282/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I understand that the community of Lusk in County Dublin have developed the Lusk Community Sports Plan 2020. Implementation of community sports initiatives, including participative and infrastructure initiatives, would be a matter for the local community and any clubs in the first instance. Local authorities would also welcome and consider sporting initiatives and would be supportive of viable and worthy initiatives. The Deputy is aware that funding is available for local sporting infrastructure from my department under the Sports Capital Programme. The Local Sports Partnership Network is working in local areas to increase participation in sport and physical activity and to ensure that local sport resources are used to best effect. In that regard, I would encourage the community in Lusk to engage with the Local Sport Partnership for the Fingal area, who may be able to assist in achieving the goals in the Sports Plan 2020. The Fingal Local Sports Partnership can be contacted at the Fingal County Council Offices in Blanchardstown.

### **Health Promotion**

261. **Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the national physical activity plan; his views on whether it has been effective; and the further actions and initiatives that are planned under this programme. [14315/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan):** The National Physical Activity Plan was published in January 2016 and its implementation is being overseen by an Implementation Group co-chaired by my Department and the Department of Health. Work has commenced on over 50 of the 60 actions contained in the plan. An Implementation Template, showing progress to date and work planned for each action, is planned to be published on the Healthy Ireland website by mid 2017. The Plan contains six actions which specifically relate to monitoring and evaluation, including the establishment of a national research system to monitor physical activity levels in key target groups. Those actions provide a sound basis for appropriate monitoring which will facilitate effective implementation of the Plan.

### **Motor Insurance**

262. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14361/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** My Department is an active member on the Cost of Insurance Working Group, chaired by Minister of State Eoghan Murphy. This group examined the factors contributing to the increasing cost of insurance, and worked to identify measures which can be introduced to help reduce the cost of insurance for consumers and businesses. The report of the Cost of Insurance Working Group was published in January 2017, and all stakeholders are currently working to implement the recommendations to strict deadlines. I would, however, point out to the Deputy that neither I, nor any other Government Department, have the power to direct insurance companies on the pricing of insurance products. The EU framework for insurance expressly prohibits Member States from adopting rules which require insurance companies to obtain prior approval of the pricing or terms and conditions of insurance products. However, I am confident that the implementation of the recommendations of the Cost of Insurance Working Group will assist in driving down the cost of motor insurance in Ireland.

### **National Cycle Network**

263. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to fully implement the national cycle policy framework; and the status of the review of the policy framework promised for 2017. [14365/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** While significant progress has been made under a number of objectives contained in the National Cycle Policy Framework (NCPF) my Department has not yet undertaken a formal review of the policy framework or its implementation. However, the NCPF has been integrated into the Development Plans of the majority of local authorities so ensuring that the objectives and policies to support and promote cycling are taken account of in current and future planning. In addition, the National Transport Authority (NTA) published the GDA Cycle Network Plan covering the seven local authority areas in the Greater Dublin Area in 2013. I think that the success of the frame-



work can be seen in the significant increase in the numbers of people cycling numbers shown in the Dublin City Canal Cordon Report for 2016 published recently by Dublin City Council and the NTA. This showed that over 12,000 people cycled into Dublin's centre in November last year in the morning peak, nearly the same number as used the LUAS during the morning peak commuting hours. It must be remembered that this figure does not include the numbers using Dublin Bikes between the canals. In 2013 and 2015 my Department requested local authorities and other stakeholders for an update on progress on implementation. The Department now intends to undertake a full review of the framework and we will be pursuing this during 2017.

### **Bus Éireann Services**

264. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps he intends to take to ensure all rural bus services operated by Bus Éireann are maintained in view of the current difficult financial position of Bus Éireann. [14397/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I am fully aware of the important role the bus fulfils in ensuring public transport connectivity for rural communities. This Government has supported that role through the 11% cumulative increase I secured in Budget 2017 for both the Public Service Obligation (PSO) programme and the Rural Transport Programme. That increase means that in 2017 approximately €277million will be available to the National Transport Authority (NTA) to support these important programmes, which underpin the delivery of taxpayer funded bus services across rural Ireland. I have committed publicly to further increasing the funding of those programmes in the future as resources allow. Bus Éireann has benefitted from that increased funding for its PSO services and I have no doubt it will benefit again this year. So let's be clear, publicly funded bus services in rural Ireland are expanding and improving and that includes Bus Éireann's PSO network.

I have no doubt the Deputy is aware that across rural Ireland the publicly funded bus services are complemented by a huge range of privately operated bus services. These bus services are provided by operators under licence from the National Transport Authority pursuant to the Public Transport Regulation Act 2009, receive no taxpayer funding and operate on a commercial basis. Unlike the PSO network, commercial routes are decided by the operator with a view to a commercial return. In 2015 around 23 million people travelled on a commercial bus service, which represents approximately 9% of all public transport journeys that year.

I have repeatedly assured rural Ireland that the NTA has the statutory powers available to it to ensure continued public transport connectivity for communities who may lose services in cases where a commercial operator introduces service changes. In its recent response to proposed Expressway route changes announced by Bus Éireann, the NTA has utilised these statutory powers through for example announcing increased PSO services and amending the scheduling of existing rural transport services in order to address identified transport needs caused by the Expressway changes.

### **Rail Services Provision**

265. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there will be any change in Irish Rail pricing on commuter lines as census 2016 produces more detailed statistics; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14013/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The issue raised is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) and I have forwarded the Deputy's question

to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Tourism Data**

266. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of tourists visiting County Wicklow on an annual basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14500/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The collection of statistics are primarily a matter for the Central Statistics Office (CSO). I understand that the CSO does not provide a county by county breakdown of statistics in their monthly 'Overseas Travel' publication. I am aware, however, that Fáilte Ireland, provides an estimated county by county breakdown of overseas visits on an annual basis, based on research of its own as well as available CSO statistics. I have asked Fáilte Ireland to provide the Deputy with further information. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Tourism Funding**

267. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the percentage of his Department's budget spent on tourism, including a breakdown of these costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14501/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** REV 2017 provides a total of approximately €122m for the Tourism Services Programme which is 6.7% of the overall Department's budget. Apart from the pay and administration overhead, this funding is all channelled through the tourism agencies - Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland - as set out below:- Fáilte Ireland €57.9m - Tourism Ireland €14.6m

- Tourism Marketing €35.9m
- Tourism Product Development €12.5m
- Pay and Administration Overhead allocation €1m.

### **Tourism Funding**

268. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the available grants for local communities to develop tourism opportunities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14502/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** My Department's role in relation to tourism lies in the area of national tourism policy. It is not directly involved in the management or development of individual tourism projects. These are operational matters for the Board and Management of Fáilte Ireland. While the Department provides funding to Fáilte Ireland to develop tourism offerings, it does not have a role in the administration of those capital programmes. Similarly, the Department does not have discretionary funds at its disposal to assist with individual tourism proposals. Fáilte Ireland provides a range of practical supports to help businesses and communities better manage

and market their products and services. Fáilte also provides supports for investment in tourism attractions as well as advice on the supports available from other agencies. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte for further information and direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not hear within ten working days.

### **Public Transport Provision**

269. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to develop public transport links in County Wicklow, particularly in south-east Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14503/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the development and implementation of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) which includes Wicklow. The NTA's Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016-2035 provides a framework for the planning and delivery of transport infrastructure and services in the GDA over the next two decades. The NTA is currently preparing an Implementation Plan for the delivery of the GDA Strategy for the period 2017-2022 in line with the capital funding that will be available for investment in public transport infrastructure over the period. Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### **Road Safety**

270. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if plans exist for the installation of a pedestrian bridge at a location (details supplied), in view of the ongoing danger to pedestrians; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14504/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter in the first instance for TII in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act. Noting the above position, I have referred the Deputy's question to TII for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Road Traffic Accidents Data**

271. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of fatal and serious road traffic collisions that have been reported over the past ten years in which a tractor was involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14512/17]

272. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the location of all road traffic collisions involving tractors on the road, that is if they were at road junctions, a gateway and so on, and the road types such as national, regional or local roads; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14513/17]

273. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the

reason for tractor-related accidents; if there were issues such as visibility, road junctions and poor road maintenance or bad corners that were reported as being the causes of the accidents in which tractors were involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14514/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 271 to 273, inclusive, together.

The following table, compiled by the Road Safety Authority, sets out the number of fatal and serious injury collisions over the period 2004 - 2013 involving an agricultural vehicle or tractor. This information relates to collisions that occurred on a public road, based on reports provided to the Road Safety Authority by an Garda Síochána. Please note that more recent statistics detailing collisions involving tractors are not currently available and those supplied do not include collisions which took place on private land, which are outside the remit of my Department. No further details of the location and circumstances spanning this time period are available; and the Deputy should note that in this data, while at least one party was using an agricultural vehicle, it does not necessarily mean that the driver/passenger of the agricultural vehicle was the injured party.

Year	Fatal	Serious
2004	7	11
2005	5	11
2006	5	12
2007	5	5
2008	6	8
2009	3	4
2010	4	7
2011	3	4
2012	4	4
2013	6	3

### Rail Services

274. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for investment in the rail services over the next five years, including any extension to services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14515/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I refer the Deputy to my reply of the 8th February 2017 to Dáil Question number 273 regarding investment in rail services. The position remains as outlined in that reply.

### Sports Events

275. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he continues to have discussions with the major sporting organisations with a view to encourage the use of this country as an international venue for sporting events; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14516/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The hosting of major sports events, both participative and spectator sports, can provide great opportunities to showcase Ireland and drive international visitor numbers. In addition, the media coverage of sports

events helps to put Ireland onto travel itineraries as a holiday destination.

Accordingly, I am very supportive of the ongoing efforts of the tourism agencies and the national governing bodies of sport to attract international events, subject, of course, to an assessment of the costs/benefits involved in any State financial support, in particular the number of overseas visitors.

For example, the Government assisted the IRFU in its successful bid to host the Women's Rugby World Cup which will take place in 2017. The Government also supported the FAI in its successful bid to host four games as part the UEFA Euro 2020 football championship and the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive are supporting the IRFU in its preparation of a bid to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023. Ireland has successfully passed the Applicant Phase of that process and is now through to the Candidate Phase. The Governments will be working very closely with the IRFU to ensure that the best possible bid is lodged with World Rugby next June to bring the Rugby World Cup to Ireland in 2023. A final decision will be made by World Rugby in November 2017.

A number of other international sports events are due to be hosted in Ireland in 2017 with the support of Government. They include the International Taekwon-Do World Championships, the European Senior Bowling Championships, the Junior Touch Championships, the Japan Karate Association World Championships, the Youth World Coarse Fishing Championships, the Grand Masters Hockey Celtic Cup, the FIBA Under 18 Women's European Basketball Championships.

### **Tourism Promotion**

276. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which potential growth opportunities for business tourism in this country continue to be identified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14517/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The role of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in relation to tourism lies primarily in the area of national policy. The development of business tourism is an operational matter for the Boards and Managements of Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland.

Accordingly, I have asked the tourism agencies to reply to the Deputy directly in this regard. Please contact my private office if you do not hear from them within ten working days.

### **Tourism Industry**

277. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which any particular sectors of the tourism sector to date in 2017 have shown particular potential for growth with consequent economic benefit in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14518/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** 2016 was a record year for overseas tourism to Ireland with a total of 9,584,400 visits representing a 10.9% increase on 2015, or an additional 941,300 visits. The CSO tourism data available for 2017 shows that the number of overseas visits between November 2016 and January 2017 increased by 7.2% compared to the corresponding period of November 2015 to January 2016.

Research carried out on behalf of the tourism agencies and tourism industry has found that certain market segments have a higher likelihood to select Ireland as a destination. Tourism Ireland's overseas marketing activity is weighted towards these segments in order to provide the best return on marketing investment.

In addition, the tourism brand experiences that have been developed by Fáilte Ireland, like the "Wild Atlantic Way", "Ireland's Ancient East", and "Dublin – A Breath of Fresh Air" – are all designed to meet the needs of the most promising consumer segments in overseas source markets.

### **Public Transport Review**

278. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which a study has been carried out of the public transport sector in County Kildare with particular reference to the need to address any deficiencies in respect of daily frequency of rail and bus services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14519/17]

283. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which the public transport sector in County Kildare is monitored on an ongoing basis with particular reference to addressing any deficiencies in respect of the daily frequency of rail and bus services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14524/17]

284. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the degree to which the increased requirement of the Kildare commuter rail sector continues to be monitored to ensure the availability of the highest possible quality of service to meet the needs of commuters on an ongoing basis; if extra rail carriages need to be provided to alleviate potential overcrowding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14525/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 278, 283 and 284 together.

The issues raised are matters for the National Transport Authority (NTA) and I have 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.

### **Tourism Promotion**

279. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he continues to promote Ireland as a conference venue in view of the likely economic benefit, including job creation and tourism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14520/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** The role of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in relation to tourism lies primarily in the area of national policy. The matter raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for the Boards and Managements of Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland.

Accordingly, I have asked the Agencies to reply to the Deputy directly in this regard. Please contact my private office if you do not hear from them within ten working days.

### **Transport Infrastructure Provision**

280. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which road, rail, air and sea transport facilities continue to be measured in the context of overall integration with particular reference to a maximisation of efficiency and availability of services throughout the entire country, thereby maximising the economic benefit to the economy in general; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14521/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** My Department's Mission Statement is to "shape the safe and sustainable development of transport, tourism, and sport, to support economic growth and social progress".

In pursuing this mission we are committed to the development of an integrated transport policy that delivers the best possible outcomes. An integrated and co-ordinated transport system is an important consideration when it comes to future decisions on transport investment. In making decisions as to the future, my Department has been active to ensure that a co-ordinated approach is taken and that we do not look at land, maritime or aviation transport in isolation from each other.

The Department's Statement of Strategy, available on the Department's website *www.dttas.ie*, sets out the means by which the Department aims to achieve this coordination and integration.

### Regional Airports

281. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he is satisfied that adequate focus remains on the need to ensure the future of regional airports in the context of a modern economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14522/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** I am satisfied that my Department maintains adequate focus on the regional airports in Donegal, Ireland West Airport Knock, Kerry and Waterford, commensurate with the scale of operations at these airports. This is reflected in the National Aviation Policy, published by my Department in 2015, which acknowledges the role played by these smaller airports as being important in promoting a level of connectivity to support the tourism and business sectors in their regions. In this regard, Exchequer support under the Regional Airports Programme 2015-2019 for safety and security projects and activities at these airports will be continued where appropriate.

It is of course a matter for the airports themselves to exploit all potential opportunities to develop air services at their facilities.

### Road Safety

282. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which well known and identifiable accident black spots remain an issue throughout the country; the extent to which efforts are being made to address the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14523/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** Local authorities are responsible for mapping and collating available collision data on regional and local roads. Where analysis shows that engineering measures may assist in reducing the collision risk at a particular location then any local authority which is not fully self funding in terms of roads (under the new Local Property Tax regime) may apply to my Department for funding under

the Safety Improvement works programme. Each year monies are made available to local authorities for such works with priority given to works that are considered to be most effective in reducing collisions.

Collision data for national roads is mapped and collated by Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII). Accordingly I am forwarding your query to TII for direct reply in respect of national roads. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

*Questions Nos. 283 and 284 answered with Question No. 278.*

### **Road Network**

285. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which plans are in hand to extend motorway services to other regions throughout the country with a view to ensuring that the availability of such transport is seen as an incentive for foreign direct investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14526/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Within its annual budget the planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

The Capital Plan 2016-2021 sets out transport investment priorities from 2016 to 2022. The transport elements of the Plan were framed by the conclusions reached in my Department's Strategic Investment Framework for Land Transport. Based on the findings in that report it is envisaged that maintenance and renewal of the road network will continue to be the main priority over the next period and the bulk of the roads capital budget, approximately €4.4 billion, is earmarked for such essential work with a further €600 million allocated for implementation of the PPP road programme which is already under way.

As regards the possibility of additional funding within the Plan period, my Department is making a strong case for additional funding for the transport sector as part of the Review of the Capital Plan currently underway. The final decisions on allocations are, however, matters for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and Government as a whole.

### **Road Projects Status**

286. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which the upgrading of over trafficked sections of motorway such as the M50 continue to be a priority both from a health and safety point of view and meeting the needs of the travelling public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14527/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Within its capital budget, the assessment and prioritisation of individual projects is a matter



in the first instance for TII in accordance with Section 19 of the Roads Act.

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

### **Bus Éireann**

287. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will liaise with the Minister for Social Protection to provide an increase to Bus Éireann in the reimbursement it receives for carrying bus pass customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14555/17]

**Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Free Travel Scheme is a non-statutory scheme under the administration of my colleague the Minister for Social Protection. As such funding levels associated with the Scheme are primarily a matter for that Minister.

However, I have publicly acknowledged the concerns expressed in recent times in relation to the current levels of funding associated with the Scheme and its potential impact on public transport operators, including Bus Éireann.

As I have previously informed the Deputy, I have written to my colleague the Minister for Social Protection in relation to these concerns and we have mandated our Departments to work together to review this matter.

### **IDA Data**

288. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the number of IDA jobs created and lost in County Wexford in 2016; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14355/17]

289. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the number of job announcements for the south east for each of the years 2011 to 2016 and to date in 2017, by county; the number of IDA visits in the south east by county for each of the years 2011 to 2016 and to date in 2017; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14356/17]

290. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the number of IDA jobs created and lost in the south east region in 2016; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14357/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 288 to 290, inclusive, together.

There were 24 job announcements by IDA Ireland client companies in the South East region from 2011 to date. It is important to realise that the number of announcements does not necessarily reflect the level of FDI activity in the region, because not all IDA clients choose to publicly announce investments. In 2016, IDA supported companies in the South East created 1,202 jobs, bringing total employment in the region to 13,369 with 526 job losses.

In County Wexford IDA Ireland supported companies created a total of 171 new jobs in 2016 with a loss of 27 the same year.

*Questions - Written Answers*

IDA Ireland carried out 176 site visits to the region from 2011 until the end of 2016, with 2015 and 2016 figures more than double those of the previous two years. Site visit data is collated at quarterly intervals on a county basis. Data for the first quarter of 2017 will not be available until next month.

Details of the job announcements and the breakdown of site visits for the region are set out in the following tables:

IDA Ireland Client Company Job Announcements South East 2011-2017

	Date	Company	County
1	06/04/2011	Bausch & Lomb	Waterford
2	06/06/2011	Mycroft	Waterford
3	08/08/2011	Boston Scientific	Tipperary
4	16/09/2011	Coca-Cola	Wexford
5	22/09/2011	MSD	Tipperary
6	26/07/2012	Envelope Supply Company	Kilkenny
7	28/03/2013	Nypro	Waterford
8	30/06/2014	NuVasive	Waterford
9	02/10/2014	West Pharma	Waterford
10	05/11/2015	Clearstream	Waterford
11	25/03/2015	Sunlife	Waterford
12	25/04/2015	Agora Publishing	Waterford
13	29/04/2015	Bausch & Lomb	Waterford
14	15/06/2015	CRI	Wexford
15	07/09/2015	CipherTechs	Kilkenny
16	07/09/2015	Bluefin	Waterford
17	22/09/2015	MSD	Tipperary
18	21/01/2016	First Data	Tipperary
19	21/04/2016	OPKO Health/Eirgin	Waterford
20	13/06/2016	Eurofins	Waterford
21	30/08/2016	Se2	Waterford
22	04/11/2016	Compar AG	Waterford
23	06/02/2017	Mercury Filmworks	Kilkenny
24	06/02/2017	Red Hat	Waterford

Site Visits to South East Region 2011 - 2016

Region	County	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
South East	Carlow	2	4	1	2	1	9
South East	Kilkenny	0	3	3	4	10	10
South East	Waterford	11	26	14	11	31	17
South East	Wexford	0	3	2	1	4	7

Region	County	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
South East & Mid-West *	Tipperary	1	5	4	3	12	8
	Total	13	36	20	18	46	43

\*Tipperary straddles two regions – South East and Mid-West.

### Living Wage

291. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to progress legislation to introduce a universal living wage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14358/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** The Living Wage concept is grounded in the idea that a person's wage should be sufficient to maintain a safe, decent standard of living. At an individual level the resources required to achieve a minimum essential standard of living is very dependent on family circumstances and thus the interaction of individual earnings with household income and State-provided supports such as Child Benefit, Family Income Supplement as well as supports available in relation to housing, education and health all contribute to an individual's standard of living.

It is important that Ireland's statutory National Minimum Wage and the Living Wage concept are not conflated. The Living Wage is a voluntary societal initiative centred on the social, business and economic case to ensure that, wherever it can be afforded, employers will pay a rate of pay that provides an income that is sufficient to meet an individual's basic needs, such as housing, food, clothing, transport and healthcare. The Living Wage is voluntary and has no legislative basis and is therefore not a statutory entitlement. It is different to the National Minimum Wage which is a statutory entitlement and has a legislative basis.

The Low Pay Commission was established in 2015 and its primary function is to, on an annual basis, examine and make recommendations on the national minimum wage, with a view to securing that the national minimum wage, where adjusted, is adjusted incrementally over time having had regard to changes in earnings, productivity, overall competitiveness and the likely impact any adjustment will have on employment and unemployment levels. The Commission presented its first report in July 2015 in which it recommended an increase of 50 cents per hour to the minimum hourly rate bringing it to €9.15. That increase, which was accepted by Government, came into effect on 1 January last.

The Commission presented its second report in July 2016 and its recommendation that the minimum wage be increased to €9.25 per hour was subsequently accepted by Government and came into effect on January 1 last.

The Deputy might note that the most recent figures published by EUROSTAT show that Ireland has the second highest national minimum wage of any country in the EU at €1,563 per month, behind only Luxembourg whose minimum wage is €1,999 per month. (EUROSTAT for comparison purposes converts countries hourly or weekly rates into monthly rates).

I have no plans to bring forward proposals outside of the work of the Low Pay Commission.

292. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation further to Parliamentary Question No. 308 of 8 March 2017, the number of workplace inspections and total amount of wages recovered in 2016 for the child care sector alone; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14395/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an independent, statutory body established on 1 October 2015 under the Workplace Relations Act 2015. The WRC has responsibility for information provision, workplace advice, mediation, conciliation, adjudication, inspection and enforcement in relation to employment rights, equality and equal status matters and industrial relations.

Inspectors of the WRC carry out inspections of employer records with a view to determining compliance with employment rights and employment permits legislation. These inspections arise:

- In response to complaints received of alleged non-compliance with relevant employment rights legislation;
- As part of compliance campaigns which focus on compliance in specific sectors or specific pieces of legislation, or
- As routine inspections, which act as a control measure.

The WRC's aim is to achieve voluntary compliance with employment law through the provision of education and awareness, inspection of employers' employment records and enforcement where necessary.

The Deputy will be aware from my previous reply that in 2016 the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) recovered a total of €1,521,600 in unpaid wages in 4,830 cases.

Details in relation to the number of workplace inspections undertaken by the WRC in 2016 in the childcare sector alone are not available as employers engaged in childcare related activities are included with the health and nursing sectors for statistical purposes. In addition, inspections of employers of domestics workers may include some childcare cases but these childcare cases are not identified separately. The overall numbers for the year 2016 are as follows :

Sector	Number of Employers Inspected	Amount of Wages Recovered
Domestic Workers	22	€4,728
Health Nursing and Child-care	82	€156,071

### Youth Unemployment

293. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation when youth unemployment was last discussed at an EU Council meeting. [7358/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** On 8 December 2016, the EPSCO Council discussed youth unemployment under the format of EU policies on the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative.

At EU level, discussions on youth unemployment fall under the remit of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, also known as EPSCO. While youth un-

employment activation policies fall primarily under the responsibility of the Minister for Social Protection, my Department coordinates EPSCO ministerial meetings across Government.

At the 8 December 2016 EPSCO meeting, Ireland, represented by the Minister for Social Protection, Leo Varadkar, T.D. and the Minister for Employment and Small Business, Pat Breen, T.D. supported the adoption of Council Conclusions on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative.

These Conclusions noted the significant progress on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative to date and called on Member States the step up the implementation of these policies in Member States.

In addition, while not focused primarily on youth unemployment, the Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council of 17 February adopted conclusions on Investing in Europe's Youth. These conclusions have a broad focus on youth affairs, including education, training, learning mobility and employment.

Ireland's youth unemployment rate continues to decline as the labour market improves. Eurostat measure Ireland's youth unemployment at 15.1% in January, down from 17.6% from January 2016 and significantly below the euro area average of 20%.

While this improvement is welcome, the Government recognises the importance of a continued focus on measures to facilitate young unemployed people find and sustain employment.

The key objective of Ireland's policy response to the EU Recommendation on a Youth Guarantee is to help newly unemployed young people find and secure sustainable jobs. In this regard, the Department of Social Protection is overseeing specific measures to address these challenges. I am confident these measures, and continuing economic recovery, will support further youth employment opportunities.

### **Economic Competitiveness**

294. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation if she will report on the research to benchmark Ireland's competitiveness against the UK in the post-Brexit environment, as mentioned in the Taoiseach's speech to the IIEA in February 2017. [10423/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** The National Competitiveness Council (NCC) reports to the Taoiseach and the Government, through me on key competitiveness issues facing the Irish economy and offers recommendations on policy actions required to enhance Ireland's competitive position.

The Council is undertaking a benchmarking research exercise comparing Ireland and the UK across a number of dimensions based on key indicators relating to competitiveness. This will provide a comprehensive statistical assessment of Ireland's competitiveness performance. Its objective is to fully understand Ireland's strengths and weaknesses, both current and future, in the wake of the UK's decision to leave the European Union. It will highlight areas where policy attention should be focused to enhance Ireland's offering.

The work is ongoing at present and will be completed by the end of Quarter 1 2017.

Benchmarking Competitiveness: Ireland and the UK

The Report will include a baseline of indicators, which will be broken down into all relevant

aspects of competitiveness, from the essential conditions underpinning performance, to the policy inputs, outputs and competitiveness outcomes. These include the following:

1. Macroeconomic Performance
2. Competitiveness and Exchange Rate Performance
3. Trade
4. Enterprise and Entrepreneurship
5. Inward Investment
6. Labour Market
7. Prices and Business Costs
8. Productivity
9. Taxation
10. Access to Finance
11. Talent
12. Infrastructure
13. Innovation
14. Energy

### **Departmental Strategies**

295. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the way her Department's officials are co-ordinating and targeting access to more EU markets following the Brexit referendum result, as mentioned in the Taoiseach's recent speech to the IIEA and at the all-island civic dialogue. [10422/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** I secured additional monies for 2017 to provide for 39 targeted posts in Enterprise Ireland (EI) to enable it to support its clients across all markets. Extra staff will be placed in EI's domestic and overseas offices with sectoral knowledge and expertise such as in engineering, food, life sciences and construction. This will drive export growth to other international markets where there are known opportunities and reduce reliance on the UK.

Enterprise Ireland's new Strategy 2017 – 2020 will support more Irish companies to achieve greater scale and expand into new export markets. Though the 'Global Ambition' strategy we will continue our efforts in the established export markets of France, Benelux, Germany and the Nordics where Irish companies already have substantial exports. We will have a major focus on directing resources and expertise to the Eurozone markets, targeting a 50% increase in exports by 2020.

Furthermore, the US and Canada will continue to be key markets for Irish companies. We will also continue to support companies to build their market share in high potential markets of China, South Korea, India, ASEAN, the Gulf, Latin America and Africa.

A key element of the 2017 drive for expanding our global export footprint include an enhanced programme of trade and investment missions, market study visits and inward buyer visits from markets with specific sectoral opportunities.

Key events taking place in the Eurozone region will be Mobile World Congress [Spain], Paris Air Show [France], Batimat Construction [France], Datacentre Market Study Visit [Denmark and Sweden], Agritechnica [Germany], Port Development Infrastructure [Denmark], Med in Ireland [Dublin], Medica [Germany], PharmaBuild [Benelux], TV and Animation Market Study Visit [Italy], and Telefonica 2017 Opportunities [Spain].

In 2017, EI will also roll out the ‘Global Ambition’ communications campaign to promote Irish companies and their products and services to international buyers.

Enterprise Ireland’s Irish based team will be enhanced with additional staff to provide various targeted supports and programmes to assist companies before they enter the market. Training and supports in terms of management capability, leadership, marketing/sales skills, innovation and R&D will help companies to build market share and create new market opportunities.

Enterprise Ireland will also deliver a suite of supports that help clients reduce supply-chain costs and drive efficiencies and cost reductions as a means of improving operating margins, thereby increasing competitiveness.

### **Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement**

296. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation her views on the passing of the CETA trade deal by the EU and its implications for trade here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8706/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O’Connor):** The EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) covers virtually every aspect of economic activity. It will remove over 99% of tariffs and will create sizeable new market access opportunities in services and investment in many sectors for Irish firms.

Irish firms will also be able to bid for Canadian public contracts at the federal and sub-federal level. They will benefit from the recognition of product standards and certification, thus saving on ‘double testing’ on both sides of the Atlantic. CETA provides significant opportunities for the Irish dairy industry and has strong protections for our beef industry through restricted quotas for Canadian beef entering the EU. There are a range of sectoral opportunities for Irish firms in Canada, including financial software, telecoms, digital media, agricultural machinery and life-sciences and medical devices.

I support the provisional application of CETA so that Irish firms may immediately benefit from the Agreement and to generate jobs and growth for Ireland. My Department is already working with our agencies and Business Groups to ensure that Irish firms take early advantage of the terms of the Agreement. I will be leading a trade mission to Canada in the first half of this year to promote the opportunities provided by CETA.

### **Commercial Property**

297. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to tackle commercial vacancy rates, particularly in the north west and County Sligo, which has the highest rate of vacant commercial property here; and if she will make a statement

on the matter. [14437/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** Decisions in relation to the renting of commercial premises are a matter, in the first instance, for private sector enterprises and not a matter in which I have a function.

A key intervention in terms of tackling commercial vacancy rates lies in the setting, by local authorities, of incentivised business rates for unoccupied premises. To this end, a number of Local Authorities have introduced locally designed business incentive schemes which promote the use of vacant commercial property. These schemes give an incentive to new business owners to occupy vacant premises by lowering entry costs through a grant related to the level of rates payable on the property.

While the levying and collection of rates are matters for each individual local authority, I understand that the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government will shortly be bringing legislative proposals to Government to modernise the legislation relating to commercial rates. These proposals will include providing powers to local authorities to introduce rates alleviation schemes to promote national and local policy objectives.

Also, the recently published Action Plan for Rural Development provides a commitment for the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to review planning legislation to allow the change of use of vacant commercial properties in cities, towns and villages, including vacant or under-utilised areas over ground floor premises, into residential units without having to go through the planning process.

### **Departmental Strategies**

298. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the targeted strategies the IDA and Enterprise Ireland are developing and implementing in counties Sligo, Leitrim, Donegal and Cavan to entice clients and investment in view of Brexit negotiations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14438/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** I am very much aware of the potential impact of Brexit on border areas and I am committed to doing all I can to assist enterprise in the region. I regularly engage with stakeholders from the area and, on 19 January, I hosted a large delegation of elected representatives from Cavan and Monaghan to discuss issues including Brexit.

IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices are also working on an ongoing basis with client companies to both mitigate the challenges and maximise the opportunities arising from the UK's decision to leave the EU. InterTrade Ireland is also working with companies engaged in North-South trade to ensure they are best prepared as possible to address the challenges Brexit may pose for cross-border commerce.

The wider strategy for increasing employment in the region is the Regional Action Plan for the North East/North West, which has a strong Brexit focus. This plan aims to support the creation of 28,000 new jobs across Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth by 2020. I am pleased that there has been strong progress made to date towards that objective, with 5,600 more people in employment across the region since the start of 2015.

### **IDA Portfolio**



299. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation if her Department and the IDA have identified a client to invest in the new facility at the Finisklin industrial estate in County Sligo; when an announcement is expected regarding same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14441/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** I am informed by IDA Ireland that the 31,000 square foot Advance Technology Building located in Finisklin Business Park Sligo is due for completion at the end of next month. I understand that this building is already being actively marketed by the Agency to all potential investors.

### **Job Initiatives**

300. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the solutions the Government and its agencies have in place to tackle unemployment in rural Ireland in view of the delay in awarding of contracts under the national broadband plan. [14528/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** The Irish economy has come through an extraordinary period over the last ten years. Our enterprise base is more competitive, export oriented and more innovative. Jobs are being created by enterprises in every region and every sector in the country. The Action Plan for Jobs process, which I and my Department co-ordinate across Government, has been very successful.

Almost 206,000 more people are at work since the first Plan was launched in 2012 - that is an average of just under 40,000 per annum over the last five years. We want to add up to 45,000 more jobs in 2017.

As Minister, I want two of every three jobs created in the regions. I will shortly announce a competitive call for innovative proposals to boost regional growth, with funding of up to €60 million.

We will promote the development of a network of eHubs across the regions, beginning with an audit of all existing and potential hubs.

EI's target is to add 15,000 gross new jobs in 2017, support 250 large scale investments, win an extra 1,000 sales contracts and increase exports to €23 billion.

The Local Enterprise Offices support a net increase in employment of over 3,800 in 2016 and we are targeting a similar increase in 2017.

We are also developing an integrated communications plan to raise awareness of the range of enterprise supports available and how to access them.

We also want to ensure that all sections of the workforce contribute to their full potential and as Minister, I am placing an emphasis on female participation and female entrepreneurship in particular. We are focusing on the older workers in the labour market through a combination of measures. This includes a new draft Code of Practice to set out best practice in managing the engagement between employers and employees in the run up to retirement and measures to support senior entrepreneurship.

We will launch a toolkit for employers and employees to engage in workplace innovation and roll out a pilot programme.

We will harness the creativity of our citizens to address these challenges and opportunities. Creativity and our strength in design can give us a competitive advantage in all sectors of the

economy from manufacturing to retail.

Maximising the retail potential of our town centres is vital and we are committed to developing a template for retail development in our towns.

I am also focusing on new opportunities arising from the digitalisation of the economy and society. We will develop a whole of Government approach to realise the digital economy opportunities across all sectors, including a stakeholder summit in the first quarter.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP), which is being delivered by my colleague Minister Naughten, aims to deliver high speed broadband services to every city, town, village and individual premises in Ireland. The Programme for Government commits to the delivery of the NBP as a matter of priority. This is being achieved through a combination of commercial investment by the telecommunications sector and a State intervention in those areas where commercial investment has not been fully demonstrated.

There has been significant progress in relation to broadband roll out so that today, approximately 1.4m or 61% of premises in Ireland can get high speed broadband of a minimum of 30 Megabits per second. The NBP has been a catalyst in encouraging investment by the telecoms sector, which is continuing to expand this footprint.

Minister Naughten has informed me that a formal procurement process is in train to select a company or companies who will roll-out a new high speed broadband network within the State Intervention Area. The procurement process is being intensively managed, to ensure an outcome that delivers a future-proofed network that serves homes and businesses across Ireland, for at least 25 years. The timeframe for the procurement continues to be dependent on a range of factors including the complexities that may be encountered by the procurement team and bidders, during the procurement process.

### **Job Initiatives**

301. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the extent to which she is working to attract jobs and SMEs in the north west, thereby encouraging an overall balanced economy with consequent economic benefits for Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14529/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** The Regional Action Plans for Jobs are aimed at maximising the strengths and assets of each region, to support enterprise growth and job creation.

The key strength of the stakeholders like the local authorities, the educational bodies, the enterprise development agencies and the private sector all working collaboratively to maximise opportunities, means that every county will benefit under this initiative.

The North East/North West Regional Action Plan for Jobs is stimulating job creation across the region, by facilitating collaborative initiatives between the public and private sector, and through the provision of new competitive funds awarded through Enterprise Ireland, to support regional enterprise projects.

The North East/North West Plan aims to support the creation of 28,000 jobs across Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, and Louth by 2020.

Sectors targeted as part of the plan include traditionally strong sectors for the region like

agrifood, manufacturing/engineering and tourism, including active promotion of the tourism potential of the Lakelands Region, which includes Cavan and Monaghan.

There has been a substantial improvement in the North East/North West region since the commencement of the National Action Plan for Jobs in 2012, with an additional 23,000 in employment in Q4 2016 compared to Q1 2012. Moreover, there are now almost 6,800 more people in work in the region since the launch of the Regional Action Plan initiative in Q1 2015.

The unemployment rate in the region has fallen from 10.2% in Q1 2015 to 8.0% at present, compared to the national rate of 6%.

IDA, Enterprise Ireland (EI), and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) are making a significant contribution to employment in the three North West counties.

The three North West counties are home to 39 existing IDA Ireland clients who between them employ 5,742 people in a range of manufacturing and service operations. Since end-2014, IDA supported companies have seen a net increase of 505 jobs in the North West.

EI companies currently support 6,049 jobs in the North West counties. EI job announcements in 2016 in the North West included LotusWorks (50 jobs in Sligo) and VistaMed (200 jobs in Leitrim).

The North West LEOs are fully engaged in supporting the micro-enterprise and small business sectors in their areas to create and sustain jobs. The three LEOs have supported gross job gains of 1,281 in its client companies in the past 2 years.

My Department is providing additional funds through the agencies out to 2020. Together with Enterprise Ireland, I am currently finalising plans for a regional initiative of up to €60m to support collaborative approaches to grow and sustain jobs across the regions, and to encourage each county to reach its full potential.

### **Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities**

302. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the way she plans to increase the number of persons with a disability at work, after an ESRI report showed that only 31% of persons aged 20 to 59 years of age with a disability were at work compared to 71% of those without a disability. [14557/17]

**Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor):** My Department's mission is to encourage the creation of high quality and sustainable full employment by championing enterprise across government, supporting a competitive enterprise base, and promoting fair and competitive markets. My Department does not have a direct role on the formulation of policy on the provision of employment or other supports for people with disabilities.

Since the first Action Plan for Jobs was launched in early 2012, almost 206,000 more people are at work. Over 66,000 jobs were created during 2016. Employment growth is spread across all regions and all sectors of the economy and society.

In February, we published the Action Plan for Jobs 2017. This Government's goal is to ensure that all of our people have the opportunity to enjoy rewarding work and to participate and contribute to their full potential to our economy and society.

The 2017 Action Plan sets out a whole of Government response to secure employment and

retain jobs in the face of global uncertainty by strengthening the resilience and agility of our enterprise base.

In developing APJ 2017, I had a number of discussions with my colleague Minister Finian McGrath T.D., Minister of State with special responsibility for Disabilities, and with representatives of the disability sector.

The 2017 Plan commits to the implementation of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities and ensures that people who are able to, and want to work are supported and enabled. This strategy falls under the remit of the Department for Justice and Equality. There are a range of measures to equip people with the skills to avail of job opportunities as they arise, including activation measures under Pathways to Work. The Government is also committed to increasing the target for employees with disabilities in the public sector towards 6.0% by 2024 from the current level of 3.5%.

We will continue to work across Government to ensure that people with disabilities have the opportunity to participate fully in the workforce. This includes continued participation in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Persons with a Disability Implementation Group (CES) and the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Group (NDIS), both of which are being led by the Department of Justice & Equality.

My Department has implemented a CES action to highlight the supports that are available to facilitate the employment of people with disabilities in the open labour market, or to retain in the workforce employees who acquire a disability.

The Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 prohibits discrimination on nine grounds including the ground of disability. The Acts apply to prospective employees in claiming discrimination in access to employment. Any person who believes that s/he has experienced discrimination which is contrary to the Employment Equality Acts may seek redress by referring a complaint to the Director General of the Workplace Relations Commission, which is an Office of my Department. A case may be lodged through the Workplace Relations Commission's website at [www.workplacerelations.ie](http://www.workplacerelations.ie). General information relating to employment rights is available on the website and from the Workplace Relations Commission's Information Service at Telephone: 1890 80 80 90.

### School Discipline

303. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the names of the agencies or departmental sections that she has charged with making investigations and inquiries further to information (details supplied) concerning forced absence sanction and punishments at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14379/17]

304. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the time-frame within which she will have received a report providing her with the results, the inquiries and investigations she will initiate further to information (details supplied) concerning forced absence sanction and punishments at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14381/17]

305. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on the evident ongoing excessive use of forced absence punishments in a school (details supplied) with regard to the negative educational impact on students at the school. [14383/17]

306. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views

on the evident ongoing excessive use of forced absence punishments in a school (details supplied) with regard to the emotional and development impacts for students at the school and for their families. [14385/17]

307. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on the evident ongoing excessive use of forced absence punishments in a school (details supplied) with regard to student school references and the adverse impact that such a high level of suspensions and expulsions will have on so many students' summer work and first career prospects beyond second level. [14387/17]

308. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the steps she is empowered to take to investigate and to ensure that the evident excessive use of forced absence punishments in a school (details supplied) ceases immediately; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14389/17]

309. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if any State agencies or Departments have, within the past 12 months, been in contact with a school (details supplied) concerning the excessive forced absence punishment regime and records there; when such contacts were made; the nature of the contact; the details of the responses received from the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14391/17]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 303 to 309, inclusive, together.

The Educational Welfare Service (EWS) of Tusla has confirmed that it has written to the school in question and offered to convene a meeting with the local Education Welfare Service team and the school's pastoral care team given the high levels of suspension and expulsion in the school. The purpose of the meeting would be to explore the use of the suspension process and offer guidance on alternative strategies such as restorative practices and to signpost school support services such as the National Education Psychological Services and the National Behaviour Support Service. No response has been received from the school to date. The local Education Welfare Officer continues to provide a service to any parent seeking advice and guidance in matters related to suspension and/or expulsion.

Educational Welfare Officers have no powers to compel Boards of Management of schools to act in a particular way, or to meet with them in matters of policy formation. Tusla EWS in its former iteration as the National Education Welfare Board published Guidelines for schools on Drafting a Code of Behaviour in 2007. While the Guidelines have a statutory basis in the Education Welfare Act the EWS cannot compel schools to follow them, other than advising and assisting parents in the matter of a potential appeal.

Further, my Department has no power to compel schools to manage their day to day business in any way other than those laid out in the Education Welfare Act.

Through the Whole School Evaluation Process, the Department of Education and Skills examines all policies and procedures of schools and makes recommendations for any changes. These Whole School Evaluation reports are publicly available on the Department of Education and Skills website.

### **Child Care Services Funding**

310. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the new affordable child care scheme; and if she will

make a statement on the matter. [14507/17]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone):** I can offer an assurance that any parent who is currently in receipt of a targeted childcare subsidy (either the Community Childcare Subvention or one of the Training and Employment Childcare programmes) and who remains eligible for one of those schemes will not see a reduction in their subsidy rate. Transition arrangements for the Affordable Childcare Scheme will include a “saver” provision under which beneficiaries under the existing schemes at the time of transition will, if the new scheme would result in a lower subsidy, continue to benefit from their existing subsidy for a transitional period.

I am very conscious of the pressures that both parents and childcare providers are under, and of the importance of having sufficient notice for any changes to childcare subsidies. My officials are working intensively, as are staff of Pobal, to ensure that the transition to the full Affordable Childcare Scheme happens as quickly and smoothly as possible, and that full information is available to parents and providers. I expect to be in a position to provide more information on the transition in the coming weeks, and supports will be provided to ensure that parents and providers are aware of changes that will affect them.

### Child Care Services Provision

311. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to improve the community child care subvention programme, particularly for children whose parents are in band A, have benefitted from the old scheme and face higher rate payments under the new scheme, which will result in some children being deprived of child care, with particular reference to attendance at homework and after-school services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14539/17]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone):** I plan to replace existing targeted childcare schemes, including the Community Childcare Subvention, with a single Affordable Childcare Scheme that links the level of subsidy to a family’s income, with the largest subsidies going to those with the lowest incomes. The benefits of moving to an income basis for payments under the new scheme include:

- Clarity, with a move away from a complex array of eligibility criteria under the current programmes to a single, clear basis under the new scheme.
- Reduction of welfare traps and increased support for progression into employment and retention in employment.
- Equity, in ensuring that low-income families that are in employment or self-employed are not excluded from benefitting from subsidised childcare. (Under the current schemes, payment is largely based on receipt of social welfare payments, rather than income.)

The base income threshold of €22,700 in the new Affordable Childcare Scheme will guarantee that the maximum rate of subsidy is available to all families below the relative income poverty line, while ensuring that the taper rate between the base and maximum thresholds does not generate strong disincentive effects with regard to taking up or increasing employment. It will also ensure that the majority of current scheme beneficiaries will receive the maximum subsidy rate under the new scheme.

While the new scheme will target subsidies predominately based on income, it was considered whether other criteria such as a work/training requirement should also apply, i.e. whether

the family needs childcare because both parents - or one parent in the case of a one-parent family - are working or in training.

Incorporating a work/training test into the eligibility criteria ties the scheme more clearly to its labour market participation objective, given parents' need for childcare availability to match hours of work.

Given that both a child development objective and a labour market objective are relevant to this scheme, it was determined that there should be a balanced approach to eligibility: while parents will qualify for a subsidy because of their income level, participation in work/training will determine whether the subsidy is for enhanced hours of childcare (up to 40 hours per week) or standard hours of childcare (up to 15 hours per week). When parents are not in work or training, childcare will be subsidised on a standard hours basis.

This approach will mean that this scheme is open – albeit for standard hours rather than enhanced hours – to parents who stay at home to care for their children, or who are not taking part in work or training, but who choose to avail of up to 15 hours of childcare per week. This 15 hours is inclusive of time spent in school or the ECCE Programme each week; in the case of school-going children it is considered that the child development objectives are met through school attendance and, therefore, the standard 15 hours of subsidised childcare per week will be available only in holiday periods (i.e. non-term time).

Finally, under the existing Community Childcare Subvention programme, to be replaced by this new scheme, beneficiaries may qualify for full-time childcare subsidies even if they are not in work or training. During the transition to the new scheme, any current beneficiaries who face a reduction in their subsidy will enjoy a “saver” status whereby they will retain their existing benefits for a period of time following the introduction of the new scheme. However, thereafter they, and any similar new entrants to the scheme, who are not in work or training will qualify for the standard hours of childcare only.

## Road Signage

312. **Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence his plans to upgrade the signage for the closure of the Hollow Road on the Curragh; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14291/17]

**Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe):** Range No. 3 is a rifle range within the Curragh Camp and since March 2016 the Defence Forces have resumed training on this range. This has resulted in the occasional temporary closure by the Defence Forces of the Hollow Road. The temporary road closures are required as part of strict control and safety measures put in place by the Defence Forces to ensure public safety during the firing of live ammunition on Range No. 3.

These occasional temporary road closures by the Defence Forces are in accordance with the provisions of Section 274 of the Defence Act, 1954, as amended. This provides the Defence Forces with the powers to temporarily stop all traffic in the vicinity of any place used for rifle practices. It is acknowledged that the occasional temporary closure of the Hollow Road may be an inconvenience for some local residents.

I have been advised by the military authorities that signage is temporarily erected at either end of the Hollow Road and Brownstown on the day prior to the required closures. This gives advance notice of the date and duration of the proposed road closure. This alerts local residents and road users of the need to take alternative detour routes. Military Sentries are on duty at

either end of the Hollow Road during the road closures to control the traffic and to advise users of the alternative routes. The military authorities have also advised that red warning flags are flown while firing is being conducted, and warning lights are activated in the centre of the Curragh Camp outside of the water tower, in full view of the public as further safety and information notification measures.

The Defence Forces website, <http://www.military.ie/info-centre/dfic-road-closures/>, provides members of the public with details of planned road closures. There are no plans in place to upgrade the signage at this time.