

## 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 9, inclusive, answered orally.*

*Questions Nos. 10 to 29, inclusive, resubmitted.*

### Social Media Monitoring

30. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Taoiseach the intended purpose of the monitoring and compilation of reports on the social media activities of members of the public; the safeguards and protections in place to guide against a negative effect this could have on freedom of speech; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37168/20]

**The Taoiseach:** As part of the normal operation of the Department's press office, traditional, print and social media are monitored for content of relevance to the work of the Department. In all cases, this involves only published content that is publically available - whether traditional media, print media or social media.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

31. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach his role in defining the different measures, restrictions and guidelines in terms of the 5 levels of Covid-19 restrictions. [37229/20]

**The Taoiseach:** The Government's medium-term approach to managing COVID-19 is set out in Resilience & Recovery 2020-2021 - Plan for Living with COVID-19 which contains a Framework for Restrictive Measures across five levels. Each of the five levels contains a "basket" of measures which are intended, collectively, to contribute to lowering risk of transmission in alignment with the risk level at that time. The Framework is informed by public health advice, but also recognises the need for society and business to be allowed to continue as normally as possible.

The plan sets out the decision-making framework and the respective roles of the National Public Health Emergency Team, the COVID-19 Oversight Group, the Cabinet Committee which I chair and the Senior Officials Group.

Decisions in relation to the measures and restrictions in place at any given time are taken collectively by Government, and reflect the prevailing disease situation and recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others.

### Interdepartmental Committees

32. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach the membership of the high-level technical group on international travel; the remit and responsibility of the group; the number of times the group has met; the advices it has given; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37298/20]

**The Taoiseach:** Ireland is implementing the new EU 'traffic lights' approach to travel. A cross-Departmental Senior Officials Group meets regularly to review the position in relation to international travel, covering issues such as public health advice around travel, approaches to pre-departure and post-arrival testing, and operational issues arising. Membership of the group includes senior representatives of the Departments of the Taoiseach, Health, Transport, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Business, Tourism and the HSE. Advice and policy recommendations in this area are brought to Government by the relevant Ministers.

### **Copyright Infringement**

33. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the case of a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; if clarity will be provided on the matter regarding licence fees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37153/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** In general, the playing of music in public places is an act governed by copyright law. The Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 (the CRRA) gives the owners of copyright works, which includes musical works, certain rights over the use of their works. The legislation provides that users of musical works (such as broadcasters, owners of licensed premises, retail outlets and other places where music is publicly played) are required to pay for the use of copyrighted music.

The CRRA also provides for copyright holders to enter into license agreements with Collective Management Organisations (CMOs) to represent their rights in relation to the public use of their copyright protected works. These organisations are responsible for the collection of royalties from music users and for the distribution of these royalties to rightsholders.

The Irish Music Rights Organisation (IMRO) is a CMO that operates as a licensed body under the CRRA and represents the rights of its members (songwriters, composers and music publishers in Ireland). Phonographic Performance Ireland (PPI) is a licensed CMO that represents the rights of record companies. Playing of copyright protected music in public generally requires payment of royalty fees to both organisations.

Under a 'dual licensing' system that came into effect in 2016, IMRO administers the granting of copyright music licences, collection of royalties, and related activities on behalf of both organisations. The new arrangement enables businesses that play music publicly to obtain the appropriate copyright music licences by making a single payment. In the absence of a license from IMRO/PPI, the playing of copyright-protected music is not permitted.

As Minister, I do not have any function in the setting of tariffs charged by organisations representing the rights of copyright holders. However, it is open to a person affected by such charges to refer a dispute, under Section 152 of CRRA, to the Controller of Intellectual Property.

Further information on the role of the Controller of Intellectual Property and the options for referring disputes are available at [www.ipoi.gov.ie](http://www.ipoi.gov.ie).

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

34. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the plans being made regarding the redundancy moratorium; and if his Department has engaged with workers and the trade union movement regarding the matter. [37249/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** In March 2020 the Government introduced an emergency amendment to the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 which effectively suspends an employee's entitlement to claim redundancy from their employer following certain periods of lay-off or short-time work due to Covid-19 during the emergency period. The Government was concerned that the financial impact of significant redundancy claims at this time would have a serious impact on the potential for businesses, and the economy as a whole, to recover which in turn could result in significant insolvency situations, with further permanent job losses.

There has been ongoing dialogue with both employee and employer representative groups on the continued operation of the emergency provision, Section 12A of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967. Most recently, at the meeting of the LEEF Sub-Group on Employment Legislation/Regulation which I chaired on 30th September, I sought the views of LEEF members. Submissions from ICTU, IBEC, Chambers Ireland and the Construction Industry Federation (CIF) were received.

The matter of a further extension is currently under consideration. In its deliberations, the Government will have regard to the social partners' views, the criteria and principles underpinning the emergency provision and the public health and labour market situations.

All other redundancy provisions remain unchanged and in force. If an employer is going to make an employee redundant, protections such as notice periods for redundancy and the payment of a redundancy lump-sum to the affected employee still apply.

## IDA Ireland

35. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of IDA Ireland site visits by county in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37154/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** When it comes to foreign direct investment (FDI), site visits represent a valuable tool through which investors can be encouraged to invest in regional areas. However, site visit activity does not necessarily reflect investment potential, as a significant percentage of all new FDI comes from existing IDA client companies.

COVID-19 has presented undeniable challenges to our ongoing efforts to sustain and grow foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ireland. The introduction of travel restrictions around the world is already disrupting the typical way in which the IDA engages with investors, resulting in fewer numbers of site visits and client meetings. The pandemic has also impacted investor confidence and has likely caused some investment decisions to be delayed or postponed.

As an alternative to site visits, the IDA has migrated many of its business development and client engagement activities to digital platforms. The Agency has developed new digital content and has also put in place an E-Site Visit experience for potential investors.

The following table details the number of IDA site visits per county in each of the years

2016 to 2019, and to date in 2020. The 2020 figures capture the total visits per County taking place with potential new investors. The IDA has hosted 131 In-Person visits and 101 E-Visits to the end of Q3.

County	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 to date
Carlow	9	8	7	9	2
Cavan	2	2	2	7	1
Clare	18	22	13	28	15
Cork	49	51	61	68	22
Donegal	7	2	8	12	1
Dublin	284	327	269	284	86
Galway	42	62	54	46	16
Kerry	3	9	10	5	1
Kildare	8	10	8	14	7
Kilkenny	10	6	5	13	6
Laois	6	4	10	5	1
Leitrim	8	5	6	2	1
Limerick	49	42	35	57	18
Longford	6	7	5	3	0
Louth	24	22	20	40	11
Mayo	5	7	10	3	1
Meath	8	3	6	4	2
Monaghan	2	1	3	4	1
Offaly	4	5	5	5	1
Roscommon	1	3	3	3	0
Sligo	20	18	15	29	5
Tipperary	8	8	5	7	8
Waterford	17	11	21	18	9
Westmeath	36	42	22	22	11
Wexford	7	3	3	6	4
Wicklow	5	2	1	6	2
Total	638	682	607	700	232

### Brexit Issues

36. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37175/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Since the outcome of the UK referendum in 2016 confirming the UK’s intention to leave the European Union, the Government has, while fully respecting that decision, acknowledged that it is regrettable.

Whatever the outcome of the ongoing future partnership negotiations between the EU and the UK, we are preparing for the fact that the UK will leave the Single Market and the Customs Union at the end of this year. This will have significant and lasting implications particularly for Irish businesses trading with the UK, excluding Northern Ireland.

Of particular interest to the Deputy is a 2018 study entitled “Strategic Implications for Ireland arising from changing EU-UK trading relations” a comprehensive and independent expert

study that my Department commissioned from Copenhagen Economics. The study examined the implications of Brexit for the Irish economy and trade, quantifying the impact of possible new barriers to trade which might emerge as a result of Brexit.

The study also provided analysis of the likely impact of Brexit on key sectors of the Irish economy. Five sectors were identified that account for 90% of the impact and these are: Agri-food, Pharma-chemicals, Electrical Machinery, Wholesale & Retail, and Air Transport. The rise of non-tariff barriers due to regulatory divergence is the main factor driving the results as opposed to the imposition of the tariff regimes of the EU and the UK on their respective imports/goods.

This analysis was undertaken on the basis of no policy action being taken although this of course is not the case given the extensive Brexit mitigation actions put in place across Government and across all sectors of the economy in the past few years.

All of the scenarios examined in the 2018 study produce a result that is less favourable than a non-Brexit scenario. The scenarios considered reflected four of the possible outcomes from the future relationship between the EU and the UK – an EEA scenario, a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), a Customs Union, or a worst-case, no trade deal, WTO scenario.

The WTO scenario was found to have the most negative impact on the Irish economy gradually reducing GDP growth by 7% by 2030; an EEA scenario would be least damaging gradually reducing GDP growth by 2.8% by 2030. The study found that regardless of the scenario modelled, the Irish economy was still expected to record strong, positive growth out to 2030. Brexit would have a dampening impact, however, resulting in a lower growth rate than would otherwise have occurred.

Following the adoption of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Revised Political Declaration (RPD) on the Future Relationship between the EU and the UK last year, my Department undertook further Brexit analysis with Copenhagen Economics. Under this latest study, two additional scenarios for a Free Trade Agreement were examined to take account of the provisions of the RPD published in January 2020. This latest study is also available on my Department's website at [www.dbei.gov.ie](http://www.dbei.gov.ie).

Overall, the findings from this study suggest that a Brexit outcome based on the RPD is likely to reduce Irish GDP by between 3.2% and 3.9% by 2030 compared with a baseline where the UK remains a member of the EU. This compares to a negative impact of 7% in the no deal (WTO basis) modelled in the previous Copenhagen Economics study.

In response to the various Brexit analysis and studies undertaken across Government I have, over the course of the last three budgets put in place through the enterprise agencies, an extensive suite of enterprise supports to assist businesses to meet the challenges presented by Brexit. They range from liquidity support through short-term and long-term loans, to restructuring aid for businesses in severe operating difficulties. The majority of enterprise supports are open to all businesses, including SMEs, and not just those that are clients of the enterprise agencies.

Budget 2021 allocated unprecedented resources to confronting the twin challenges of COVID-19 and Brexit, with €340 million to be spent on Brexit-related measures. Government has also provided for a recovery fund to assist businesses in the aftermath of COVID-19 and Brexit. A full list is available on my Department's website [www.dbei.gov.ie](http://www.dbei.gov.ie) and on [www.Gov.ie/Brexit](http://www.Gov.ie/Brexit).

Notwithstanding the overall negative impact on the economy, IDA Ireland has been working hard to capture any possible increase in investment in Ireland as a result of Brexit. This work

has resulted in 93 Brexit-related investments to date with an associated employment potential of 5,900. Two-thirds of these investments are in the International Financial Services sector with the remaining third spread out over the Life Sciences, Technology, Business Services, and Engineering sectors. While this is good news, it by no means makes up for the negatives and the expected difficulties that businesses, particularly those that trade with Britain, will face as a result of Brexit.

The Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK trading relationship following Brexit and it is the case that the UK has always, and will continue, to be an important market for Ireland.

### **Labour Court**

37. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the employment regulation order on the remuneration of security officers will be signed into law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37230/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I understand that the Labour Court on 14 October 2020 received proposals from the Security Industry Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for the adoption of proposals to amend S.I. 231 of 2017 Employment Regulation Order (Security Industry Joint Labour Committee) 2017.

Having examined the proposals and the report of the Chairman of the JLC submitted in accordance with the terms of the statute, the Court, in accordance with the Industrial Relations Act, 1946 at Section 42B(12)(d) declined to adopt the proposals of the JLC. The Court has informed the Chairman of the JLC accordingly.

In those circumstances, the Court currently has no proposals before it from the JLC and consequently will not be forwarding proposals to the Minister at this time. Any further submission of proposals by the JLC will require the Court to consider the adoption of such proposals in accordance with Section 42B of the Industrial Relations Act, 1946 Act.

### **Labour Court**

38. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when his Department will sign and implement the employment regulation order for contract cleaning and security industries. [37243/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Chairman of the Labour Court wrote to me on the 4 November 2020 confirming that the Court has adopted proposals for an employment regulation order ('ERO') in the contract cleaning sector. Accordingly, I have received draft recommendations and a statutory report supporting the legal basis for the ERO. I am giving the matter due consideration.

I understand that a draft ERO concerning proposals for the security sector has been returned by the Labour Court to the Joint Labour Committee ('JLC') on the grounds that it could not ascertain whether the statutory requirements for it to adopt the proposals had been met.

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

39. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports that are in place for shopping centres affected by the public health restrictions. [37245/20]

40. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if there are grant supports available for shopping centres affected by the public health restrictions. [37246/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 39 and 40 together.

Budget 2021 provides a significant package of tax and expenditure measures to build the resilience of the economy and to help vulnerable but viable businesses across all sectors including a new payment structure for the PUP and amendments to the EWSS.

We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the new €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. We have also announced a six-month reduction in the VAT, going down from 23% to 21% together with a range of additional public capital investment measures to support the domestic economy.

Details of the wide range of COVID-19 supports available are available on my Department's website at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

The Restart Grant Plus scheme closed as of 31 October and has effectively been superseded as part of Budget 2021 measures by the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) operated by the Revenue Commissioners. The CRSS offers a targeted, timely and temporary sector-specific support to businesses forced to close or trade at significantly reduced levels due to COVID-19 of up to €5,000 per week.

A number of minor revisions and updates were made to the NSAI's COVID-19 Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide, COVID-19 Retail Protection and Improvement Guide, and COVID-19 Shopping Centre Recovery and Protection Guide in recent weeks. This was to take into account level 5 restrictions in the face of growing transmission rates of the virus.

The documents are intended to consolidate practical guidance that is available at time of writing on how to manage business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic. It addresses risks to both workers and the public and offers guidance on how businesses can continue to trade in a manner that is safe for both employees and the public.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

41. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some employers are basing the new wage subsidy scheme off workers contracted hours rather than hours worked or 2019 weekly earnings and that this is affecting many workers whose contracts do not reflect their normal working practices. [37251/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which is administered by the Revenue Commissioners, was introduced under the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020. I would encourage the Deputy to raise this issue with my colleague, the Minister for Finance, who has the EWSS under his remit.

## **Climate Change Policy**

42. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the response by Ireland to the EU hydrogen strategy for a climate neutral Europe published in July 2020; the steps taken within his Department to assess the potential of the document; and if he plans to publish a national hydrogen strategy for Ireland. [37145/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In July, the European Commission published a hydrogen strategy for a carbon-neutral Europe. Ireland has welcomed the hydrogen strategy including the need to support the deployment of hydrogen produced from renewable sources as set out in the Programme for Government. It is clear that renewable hydrogen could play a key role in Ireland's future energy system as we move towards our target of net zero emissions by 2050. Ireland has considerable potential to produce renewable hydrogen from excess renewable electricity, particularly from offshore wind. This would provide a zero emission energy source for use in sectors that are difficult to decarbonise such as heavy goods vehicles and industry. My Department will continue to work with other departments, agencies and stakeholders to inform Ireland's input into the hydrogen strategy. This will include consideration of whether Ireland should seek to develop a stand-alone national hydrogen strategy or whether it would be more appropriate to integrate the actions needed to develop hydrogen into the next iterations of the Climate Action Plan and the National Energy and Climate Plan.

## **Brexit Issues**

43. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37176/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Ireland regrets the UK's decision to leave the EU, although we respect it. From 1 January 2021, many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally as we will no longer share EU membership. The Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the end of the transition period. Strong and vibrant connections are vital with our closest neighbour and trading partner.

The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Johnson at their meeting in Belfast on 13 August discussed the importance of nurturing and developing the bilateral relationship in a structured way in the context where the UK has left the EU.

While we will work with our UK colleagues on strengthening this relationship, it is also clear that Brexit, in any form, will have significant impacts in Ireland. The Department of Finance has projected over the medium-term the level of GDP would be around 2% – 3.25 % lower relative to a hypothetical status quo scenario.

The Brexit transition period will end in 43 days. Whatever the outcome of the ongoing future partnership negotiations, the UK will be outside the EU's Single Market and Customs Union, and EU law will longer apply to or in the UK. This will bring significant and lasting change in the relationship between the EU and UK from 1 January, 2021,.

The Government has been planning for Brexit since before the UK referendum to ensure that Irish citizens and businesses are ready as possible for all possible scenarios. The Government's Brexit Readiness Action Plan, published in September, details the actions Govern-

ment will take and the actions citizens and businesses should take to prepare for the end of the transition period. Citizens and businesses in the various sectors now need to finalise their readiness work for the end of the transition period.

Brexit planning covers many diverse areas within my Department, including, but not limited to, energy, climate, environmental standards, market surveillance and telecommunications policy.

As regards impacts on policies and sectorial areas relevant to my Department, it would appear difficult to identify positive impacts resulting from Brexit. My Department, and the agencies and bodies under its remit, continue to oversee and engage in preparedness and contingency planning for the post transition period, as appropriate for each policy area and/or sector.

### **Energy Efficiency**

44. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the upgrade of domestic meters to smart meters is compulsory; the alternative meters available to customers whose meters are at the end of their life and due for replacement if they do not wish to have a smart meter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37269/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to ensuring that the energy efficiency potential of smart meters starts to be deployed in 2021 and that all mechanical electricity meters are replaced by 2024. The Smart Meter Upgrade is a meter replacement programme to modern, smart-ready technology. New generation electricity meters are being rolled out across Europe and internationally and when the programme completes in Ireland in 2024, all domestic and business premises will have a new modern meter installed. The programme is being coordinated by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities with ESB Networks responsible for rolling out the smart-ready electricity meters.

Where a customer indicates that they do not wish to receive a Smart Meter upgrade at their premises, ESB Networks does not proceed with meter replacement at that time. ESB Networks will re-engage with these customers later as the programme continues and the benefits of the new services are better understood.

Smart meters will be required for all customers who wish to avail of smart services when they become available from electricity supply companies from January 2021 onwards. They will also be required to participate in the micro-generation scheme committed to in the Climate Action Plan.

Smart meters have been used in all new connections and fault repairs since January 2020.

Customer sentiment continues to be positive, with the vast majority of customers accepting the meter exchange appointment. In September 2019 ESB Networks commenced the replacement of over 2 million electricity meters and by end October 2020 over 180,000 electricity meters have been installed.

### **Commission for Communications Regulation**

45. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the enhanced powers for enforcement for the Commission for Communications

Regulation as set out in the programme for Government will be granted; the timeframe for the passage of the legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37328/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** ComReg currently has a suite of enforcement and sanction powers available to it in regulating the telecommunications sector. Transposition of the European Electronic Communications Code, a new European regulatory framework will include, inter alia, certain additional provisions relating to enforcement. Against the backdrop of the transposition of the Code, my Department, in collaboration with ComReg, is developing proposals to further strengthen ComReg's enforcement regime, as committed to in the Programme for Government, with a view to developing draft legislative proposals.

### **Transport Policy**

46. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport when walkability studies will be available for local authorities. [37162/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Deputy is likely aware that a walkability audit template has already been developed and is available for use by local authorities.

The walkability audit template has been developed by An Taisce Green Schools in partnership with other stakeholders including the National Transport Authority. My Department funds An Taisce's Green Schools Travel programme and I understand that, as part of that programme, 214 walkability audits were conducted in participating schools last year with 129 conducted in 2018. The development of a template means that the audit can be applied by other bodies such as local authorities.

Specifically in relation to schools, and in line with the commitment given in the Programme for Government – Our Shared Future, Minister of State Naughton and I are very keen to bring the various existing strands of supports together and develop an overarching Safe Routes to School Programme.

I know that Minister of State Naughton met with the National Transport Authority recently in this regard and I look forward to working with stakeholders in the months ahead as we finalise and roll-out the programme.

### **Brexit Issues**

47. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37188/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Since the outcome of the referendum in the UK became known my Department has been assessing the implications of the UK's exit from the European Union. It is fair to say that from a transport perspective, based on these assessments and the analysis that has been carried out, it is not evident that Brexit will have any positive impacts.

What has been made clear, not only by my Department, but by other Departments whose policy areas are reliant on transport connectivity, is that the UK's decision to leave the EU will fundamentally change the modalities of certain specific business sectors. Any business that moves goods from, to or through the UK, excluding Northern Ireland, will be subject to a range

of new customs formalities, SPS checks and other regulatory requirements that do not apply in any form to such trade today.

The Government has been planning for Brexit since before the UK referendum to ensure that Irish citizens and businesses are as ready as possible for all possible scenarios. On 9 September, the Government published its Brexit Readiness Action Plan, which details the actions Government will take and the actions citizens and businesses should take to prepare for the end of the transition period. Citizens and businesses should now finalise their readiness work for the end of the transition period. This work will continue in the weeks ahead.

While many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally on the 1st January 2021 as we will no longer share EU membership, my Department remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship. From a transport perspective my Department cooperates with the UK in a number of other sector specific international fora and we look forward to this continuing.

### **Bus Services**

48. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to ensure public transport bus links are maintained between Dublin and Belfast in view of Bus Éireann's decision to suspend the Dublin to Belfast bus route; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37191/20]

49. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated number of passengers that used bus transport links between Dublin and Belfast in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37192/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 48 and 49 together.

As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The questions raised are a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA), in conjunction with bus operators, 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.

### **Road Improvement Schemes**

50. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to provide additional funding to Transport Infrastructure Ireland for safety works to be carried on Turtulla Cross on the N62 between Thurles and the Horse and Jockey, County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37225/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the operation and maintenance of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the requirements of the

Public Spending Code Guidelines and necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII is best placed to advise on the current status and funding of these proposed works..

Noting the above position, I have referred your question, on this occasion, to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Air Accident Investigations**

51. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 360 of 3 November 2020, if the report into Rescue 116 will be published prior to the renewal of the search and rescue contract in order that failings or problems within a company (details supplied) or the Coast Guard which come to light through the compiling of the report are highlighted and addressed before a new contract is agreed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37314/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy is aware, the draft Final Report of the investigation into the accident involving Rescue 116 at Black Rock, Co Mayo on 14 March 2017 is the subject of a re-examination by a Review Board. The Review Board has been established in line with Regulation 16 of Air Navigation (Notification and Investigation of Accidents, Serious Incidents and Incidents) Regulations 2009 (SI 460 of 2009).

The timeframe for the Review Board to carry out the re-examination is a matter for the Chairperson to determine. As I have previously advised the Deputy, the 2009 Regulations provide that on completion of the re-examination the Chairperson shall make a report to me. That report should contain a summary of the proceedings of the re-examination hearing and either confirm, dismiss or vary, in whole or part, those findings and conclusions of the draft Final Report which were the subject of the re-examination. I have not yet received a report from the Chairperson.

Any lessons and recommendations arising from the Final Report will be acted upon as appropriate. The formal procurement process for the new service will be activated following a detailed business case which is currently being prepared for Government. The procurement process itself is expected to take up to 18 months, following which Government will be required to approve the contract award.

### **Rail Network**

52. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the number of freight trains that departed from Mayo bound for Waterford or Dublin in the 12-month period ending 30 September 2020. [37355/20]

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

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

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

### **Brexit Issues**

53. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37177/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Ireland regrets the UK's decision to leave the EU, although we respect it. From 1 January 2021, many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally as we will no longer share EU membership. While the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the end of the transition period, I can advise the Deputy that the net impact of Brexit on the policy areas within my remit is anticipated to be strongly negative.

Regarding the economic impact, joint Department of Finance and ESRI analysis of the macroeconomic implications of Brexit, published in March 2019, broadly captures the range of possible future relationships between the EU and the UK. The analysis finds that in the long-run (i.e. 10 years), compared to a no Brexit baseline, the level of GDP in Ireland would be around 2.6 per cent lower in a deal scenario and 5.0 per cent lower in a no-deal scenario. The principal negative impact arises from the trade shock, mitigated somewhat by a positive FDI shock resulting from a redirection to Ireland of investment from firms looking to relocate within the single market. While there is uncertainty around the ultimate trade and FDI impacts, the analysis suggests that in each scenario, any positive impact on FDI would be far outweighed by the negative impact on trade.

Regarding Ireland's international financial services sector, the nature, scale and complexity of the sector will change in a number of ways as a result of firms relocating from the UK as a result of Brexit and those looking to set up operations in the EU for the first time. The industry in Ireland has become broader and more diverse with more firms carrying out a greater range of regulated activities than at any time. The Government and the state agencies, such as the IDA, continue to work to fully capture any opportunities for inward investment that emerge.

However, it should be noted that the Central Bank of Ireland has had to work closely with financial services firms and market participants to ensure that they have contingency plans in place for the end of the transition period on 31 December in order to mitigate a range of risks that would otherwise arise. My Department has also included measures in the 2020 Brexit Omnibus Bill in order to minimise disruption to financial services.

Finally, there is also a firmly negative impact on customs procedures and the impact of these requirements on business processes and costs due to the UK leaving the Single Market and Customs Union from 1 January. Any business, regardless of size, that moves goods from, to or through the UK will need to complete a range of customs formalities, as well as Sanitary and Phytosanitary and other regulatory requirements. This will result in additional costs and administrative procedures associated with customs formalities for all businesses that trade with the UK. It is expected that the majority of businesses will engage a customs clearance agent to act on their behalf. This will increase pressure on this sector in terms of increased client numbers and increased customs declarations as each consignment will require an individual customs declaration.

The Government has been planning for Brexit since before the UK referendum to ensure that Irish citizens and businesses are as ready as possible for all possible scenarios. On 9 September, the Government published its Brexit Readiness Action Plan, which details the actions Government will take and the actions that citizens and businesses should take to prepare for the end of the transition period. Citizens and businesses should now finalise their readiness work for the end of the transition period. This work will continue in the weeks ahead.

## **Disabled Drivers and Passengers Scheme**

54. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding upgrades to vehicles for persons already in receipt of a primary medical certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37201/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Disabled Driver and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme provides for relief on VAT and VRT, based on how much the car has been adapted and whether the beneficiary is a driver or passenger, up to a maximum of

- Disabled drivers: €10,000

- Disabled passengers: €16,000

- Specifically adapted vehicles for drivers with severe disabilities: €16,000 (Specifically adapted vehicles are vehicles that need significant adaptations)

- Extensively adapted vehicles for drivers and passengers: €22,000 (Extensively adapted vehicles are vehicles that need adaptations that cost more than the open market selling price of the vehicle being adapted)

The scheme also provides for an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant. The cost of the scheme in 2019, excluding motor tax, was €72m.

A Supreme Court decision of 18th June found in favour of two appellants against the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal's refusal to grant them a PMC. The judgement found that the medical criteria set out in the Regulations did not align with the regulation making mandate given in the primary legislation to further define criteria for 'severely and permanently disabled' persons.

On foot of the legal advice received, it became clear that it was appropriate to revisit the six medical criteria set out in Regulation 3 of Statutory Instrument 353 of 1994 for these assessments. In such circumstances, PMC assessments were discontinued until a revised basis for such assessments could be established. The medical officers who are responsible for conducting PMC assessments need to have assurance that the decisions they make are based on clear criteria set out in legislation. While Regulation 3 of Statutory Instrument No. 353 of 1994 was not deemed to be invalid, nevertheless it was found to be inconsistent with the mandate provided in Section 92 of the Finance Act 1989.

In order to allow for the PMC assessments to recommence I am bringing forward an amendment to the Finance Bill to provide for the existing medical criteria in primary legislation. When the Bill is enacted, this will allow for assessments to recommence in circumstances where the legal basis for such assessments is clarified.

I consider this to be an interim solution only. While I am very aware of the importance of this scheme to those who benefit from it, I am also aware of the disquiet expressed by members of this house and others in respect of the difficulties around access to the scheme. With this in mind I have asked my officials to undertake a comprehensive review of the scheme, to include a broader review of mobility supports for persons with disabilities, and on foot of that review to bring forward proposals for consideration.

While it was regrettable that it was necessary to temporarily close the scheme to new applicants, I would like to clarify that the Scheme itself is still operating for existing Primary Medical Cert holders. All persons or charitable organisations that can currently access the Scheme

will continue to be able to do so and make claims for tax reliefs and the fuel grant in the normal manner.

### **Single Euro Payments Area**

55. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether SEPA payments made through UK-based providers will be unaffected in January 2021; if an examination has been carried out at the potential number of Irish consumers that would be affected if these providers fail to secure an EU licence before January 2021; if the Central Bank will signal some flexibility for Irish banks to continue to process these payments for a short period after January 2021 if necessary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37241/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) enables cashless euro-denominated retail payments to be made across the European Union and European Economic Area under the same basic terms and conditions.

From 1st January 2021, payments to and from the UK will be treated as payments to and from a third country for the purposes of Regulation 2015/847/EU - Funds Transfer Regulations (FTR). This means that additional information, including the payer address, will be required for fund transfers between Ireland and the UK.

The Central Bank of Ireland has had extensive and ongoing engagement with the payment service providers (PSPs) e.g. banks and payment institutions, UK supervisory authorities and industry representative bodies to understand the potential consumer impact, to assess the impact of mitigating actions taken on residual risks, to emphasise the mandatory requirements for additional information from 1 January 2021 and to monitor progress towards compliance.

There is regular reporting from Irish PSPs to the Central Bank of Ireland on the volume and value of SEPA credit transfer and direct debits between UK and Irish PSPs. Additionally, there has been regular data exchange with UK supervisory authorities to facilitate a joint and consistent approach to mitigating the risk of failed payments.

To date action has been taken by most businesses and PSPs to address the issue, and while the risk in terms of value and volume of potentially rejected payments has significantly reduced, there remains residual risk that a number of payments may be rejected from 1 January 2021 due to non-compliance with the Funds Transfer Regulation and the SEPA scheme rulebooks.

It is primarily an issue for UK payment service providers offering services to Irish customers (creditors) to ensure they have obtained the necessary authorisations from an EU competent authority before the end of this year to ensure that they can continue to offer their services.

The Central Bank of Ireland continues to engage with all relevant parties, including supervisors in other jurisdictions, to further reduce this residual risk and officials in the Department of Finance are monitoring the situation.

### **National Car Test**

56. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance the reasons there is a six-week to eight-week delay in getting an appointment for a car to be assessed for VRT in Blarney, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37270/20]

57. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department plans to take

remedial action to deal with the backlog in having cars assessed for VRT at Blarney, County Cork in order that vehicles can be assessed for VRT in an earlier timeframe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37271/20]

58. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department will give consideration to identifying a new centre for dealing with the assessment of vehicles for VRT for the Cork region due to the unreasonable delay that currently exists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37272/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 56 to 58, inclusive, together.

I am informed by Revenue that it monitors the registration service provided by National Car Testing Service (NCTS) Centres on an ongoing basis. In the context of the safety protocols relating to Covid-19, the capacity of NCTS Centres is restricted and there is less opportunity to increase their level of service than would otherwise be possible. This has resulted in delays in a number of Centres including the two Cork Centres. Working hours have been extended in these Centres to address the backlog and additional staffing is scheduled from the end of November in Blarney. Also, over the summer, the service provider increased its pre-inspection service for cars held by authorised motor dealers – details are at the following links:

[www.revenue.ie/en/importing-vehicles-duty-free-allowances/guide-to-vrt/authorised-dealers-and-processes/pre-inspection-by-national-car-testing-service-ncts.aspx](http://www.revenue.ie/en/importing-vehicles-duty-free-allowances/guide-to-vrt/authorised-dealers-and-processes/pre-inspection-by-national-car-testing-service-ncts.aspx) and [www.ncts.ie/1155](http://www.ncts.ie/1155).

The registration service offered to authorised dealers on the Revenue Online Service (ROS) of new cars and cars that have been pre-inspected has remained unchanged since the original restrictions in March and such vehicles may be registered in the normal way before delivery to a customer.

Overall, Revenue is satisfied that the service being provided at present is reasonable in the context of the safety protocols that are necessary in NCTS Centres.

### **Revenue Commissioners**

59. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding the need of a person (details supplied) to meet with the Revenue Commissioners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37274/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that it has addressed the historic matters involved in this case with the person in question on numerous occasions. This included extensive correspondence and multiple meetings with the person by various senior Revenue officials.

Revenue considers that the matter is now closed.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

60. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if he will review the employment wage subsidy scheme for independent local radio stations that are not eligible presently and for which advertising turnover has fallen by 20% due Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37281/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) has been deliberately designed as an economy wide enterprise support that is open to all sectors on the basis of a turnover test that can be applied across the whole economy while at the same time remain targeted at employers who are considered to be most in need of support.

The EWSS turnover test has been specifically calibrated so as to target the subsidy at otherwise viable employers whose businesses continue to be adversely impacted by COVID-19 by requiring a comparison of the firm's pre-pandemic operations with their current operations. The legislation provides that the employer must be able to demonstrate that they are operating at no more than 70% in either the turnover of the employer's business or the customer orders received by the employer by reference to the period from July to December 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

There is additional flexibility in the application of the turnover test to allow employers to take account of potentially sudden changes in turnover on a month-to-month "opt-in/opt-out" basis. Under the legislation, an employer is required to carry out a review of their turnover each month and confirm that they are still eligible for the scheme. At the same time, there is no cut-off deadline for access to the scheme, so if there is a reduction in turnover later in 2020 because of an unexpected reduction in business activity or a sudden change in business circumstances the employer may be entitled to make a claim for that future period.

I am satisfied that the EWSS already contains sufficient flexibility to take account of changes in business circumstances and is targeted at employers across all sectors who are most in need of support.

For those who may not be eligible for the EWSS, I would draw attention to the comprehensive package of other business and employer supports that have been made available since the July Stimulus Plan and Budget 2021 - including the Covid Restriction Support Scheme (CRSS), the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme.

## Consumer Protection

61. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the number of enforcement actions for breaches of the consumer protection code since July 2016, excluding the tracker mortgage scandal, that have been considered by the Central Bank in each year since then; the details of same without identifying the individual or firms in question; the reason none progressed to an enforcement action; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37368/20]

62. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the threshold that must be met for enforcement action to be commenced by the Central Bank for breaches of the consumer protection codes; if the current policy is to pursue other options first; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37369/20]

63. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the lack of enforcement action for breaches of the consumer protection codes since July 2016 exclusive of the tracker mortgage scandal; if he has discussed this directly with the Governor of the Central Bank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37370/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 61 to 63, inclusive, together.

The Deputy will be aware that the Central Bank is independent in its functions and decisions in relation to taking enforcement actions are for the Central Bank alone.

I am advised by the Central Bank that it has utilised its broad range of enforcement powers in an effective manner since 2016 to address breaches that may/have result(ed) in consumer harm and that enforcement is an integral part of the Central Bank's risk-based approach to supervision.

The Central Bank's strategy focuses on the following desired consumer protection outcomes:

- a positive consumer-focused culture that is embedded and demonstrated within all firms;
- a consumer protection framework that is fit for purpose and ensures that consumers' best interests are protected; and
- regulated firms that are fully compliant with their obligations and are treating their customers, existing and new, in a fair and transparent way.

The Central Bank has also advised me that it cannot comment on suspected breaches that are not pursued by way of enforcement.

Within its enforcement powers, the Central Bank has a broad range of tools, which it carefully deploys in appropriate circumstances, including the imposition of sanctions but up to and including the revocation of authorisations and the refusal and prohibition of individuals. The Central Bank has taken a number of actions in these areas since 2016 in furtherance of its consumer protection mandate. Regarding case selection, the Central Bank carefully considers which cases will best achieve the Central Bank's strategic objectives, and through strong enforcement outcomes motivate compliant behaviour and promote a culture of fairness and high standards within the financial services industry. To this end, the Central Bank maintains effective processes for the selection of referrals to enforcement. As well as evidential matters, factors such as the seriousness or significance of the suspected contraventions and the harm or risk of harm to consumers are among the considerations relevant to the appropriateness of the use of enforcement tools.

The objective is to ensure that the Central Bank is strategically deploying its enforcement tools and efficiently using its resources to achieve effective and strong enforcement outcomes. The two largest monetary sanctions imposed to date by the Central Bank – Permanent TSB plc sanctioned €21million in 2019 and KBC Bank Ireland plc sanctioned €18.3million in 2020 - evidence the Central Bank's commitment to taking strong enforcement action with real deterrence value where serious and significant breaches of consumer protection requirements are committed.

The Central Bank, as a systemic regulator, holds regulated firms and the people who run them accountable where there are serious or significant breaches of regulatory requirements and standards.

Since 2006 the Central Bank has concluded 139 cases under the Administrative Sanctions Procedure (ASP) framework with fines imposed of €123.98m. Of the 139 outcomes, 22 were imposed against individuals. The Central Bank has also taken action to revoke 28 firms' authorisations on an involuntary basis. A further 13 firms were refused authorisation to undertake regulated activities.

While the Central Banks enforcement work spans the entirety of its mandate and is wider than the Consumer Protection Code alone, since 1 July 2016 it has delivered a number of sig-

nificant outcomes which were integral to the Consumer Protection Code, including:

- against Axa Insurance Limited, which related to the operation of the Minimum Competency Code and Consumer Protection Code;
- against the New Ireland Assurance Company plc which related to the provision of incomplete information to consumers under the Consumer Protection Code;
- against Springboard Mortgages Limited in respect of tracker mortgage failings under the Consumer Protection Codes;
- against Permanent TSB plc in respect of tracker mortgage failings under the Consumer Protection Codes; and
- against KBC Bank Ireland plc in respect of tracker mortgage failings under the Consumer Protection Codes.

In addition to the above, the Central Bank uses a wide range of other tools to support its consumer protection work. It has settled 36 cases under the ASP framework, prohibited/suspended or refused 12 individuals under the Fitness and Probity regime and revoked 12 firm authorisations. It has also issued 168 Warning Notices against unauthorised providers.

Ultimately for all cases, whether they are specifically based on a breach of the Consumer Protection Code, or another sector of legislation, it is important to note that while a case may not have been settled under the Consumer Protection Codes, protecting consumers is at the centre of all of these enforcement outcomes. For example, since July 2016 the Central Bank has:

- delivered outcomes concerning (4 by ASP, 7 by revocation) retail intermediaries for failing to have adequate professional indemnity insurance (PII) in place. The Central Bank views PII as a key prudential and consumer protection safeguard and compliance with PII obligations is therefore fundamental to the Central Bank's mandate of protecting consumers.

- delivered an outcome against an individual in the insurance sector who under-reserved loss claim reserve estimates which resulted in the firm's financial position being artificially enhanced. This led to a significant risk to policy holders and consumers in the event the insurance firm did not hold sufficient assets to meet its liabilities. It is imperative that individuals working in regulated financial services and particularly those in senior roles, fully understand the risks and consequences that their decisions, actions and behaviours may have for an organisation, its employees, its customers and the wider market.

- issued 7 prohibition notices against individuals whose actions may have or had the potential to result in consumer harm. The Central Bank may issue a Prohibition Notice prohibiting an individual from performing a controlled function for a specified period or indefinitely, if we form the opinion that an individual is not of appropriate fitness and probity.

The Central Bank intervenes, within the scope of its regulatory mandate (which extends beyond the Consumer Protection Code), to ensure the interests of consumers are protected by focusing on the issues, which pose the greatest potential or actual risk of consumer harm. Its targeted interventions are aimed at addressing widespread issues that affect many customers.

A credible threat of enforcement underscores its powers to protect. It takes robust enforcement action aimed at promoting principled and ethical behaviour by and within regulated entities. Transparent and strong action where entities or individuals fall short of required standards helps to deter poor practices, achieve compliance and encourage the behaviour it expects.

## Tax Code

64. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if tax-paying pensioners on pensions alone have no entitlement to either earned income credits despite the Revenue Commissioners classification of pensions as earned income; his views on whether this amounts to discrimination against the earned income of tax paying pensioners; his plans to address the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37371/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I would like to assure the Deputy that, in addition to the basic personal tax credit, pensioners are entitled to claim the Employee or PAYE Tax Credit in respect of their pension income because it is taxable under Schedule E. The maximum Employee Tax Credit available for 2020 is €1,650.

The Earned Income Tax Credit is available to an individual whose income in a tax year includes, or is made up of, qualifying earned income, which means earned income which does not qualify for relief under the Employee Tax Credit. This includes, for example, self-employment income from a trade or profession and employment income earned by a proprietary director and his/her spouse or civil partner. The Earned Income Tax Credit is being increased from €1,500 to €1,650 in this year's Finance Bill and this increase will take effect for the 2020 tax year and subsequent years.

An individual may be eligible for both the Employee Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit, if they have qualifying sources of income, but the maximum combined credit available for the year cannot exceed €1,650. This is the position for all taxpayers in receipt of self-employment and employment income.

The Deputy should note that social welfare pensions are taxable under Schedule E but are not subject to deductions under the PAYE system. Pensioners usually have their tax liability on social welfare pensions collected by a reduction in their tax credits. This is sometimes called "coding".

Pensioners aged 65 years or over are also entitled to the Age Tax Credit, which is €245 for single persons and €490 for married couples and civil partners.

I trust this explains the issue and clarifies for the Deputy that there is no discrimination arising in the manner suggested.

## State Properties

65. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the protocols in place to record all persons who visit the official residences at Farmleigh, Phoenix Park, Dublin 15 in either personal or professional capacities; if there are visits, engagements or interactions that are exempted from recording requirements; if so, the visits, engagements and interactions exempted; and if all logs and records of visits to the official residences at Farmleigh will be provided to date in 2020. [37165/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I can confirm that all requests for the use of Steward's Lodge by the Department of An Taoiseach, for either meetings or for overnight stays, are recorded by OPW management at Farmleigh. There are no exceptions or exemptions from this recording requirement.

OPW does not keep a record of individual attendees at meetings or other visitors to the Lodge.

In regard to the 2020 log of visits I can confirm that former Taoiseach, Mr Leo Varadkar, used Steward's Lodge for the following dates:

- Meeting on 10 February
- Residential stay on 29 February
- Residential stay 30 March 2020 to 27 May

The current Taoiseach, Mr Michael Martin has not used the lodge to date.

### **Brexit Issues**

66. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37183/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Ireland continues to support the closest possible future relationship between the EU and the UK. Moreover, the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the end of the transition period.

Nevertheless, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations on the future relationship, the UK will leave the Single Market and the Customs Union on 1 January 2021. Brexit, in whatever form it takes, will have significant impacts in Ireland.

In particular, a hard Brexit will impact on economic growth, trade and employment. The conclusion of a free trade agreement would improve the outlook, but it remains the case that the way we trade with our closest neighbour will change substantially and permanently.

In recent months the Government has been ramping up its preparations for Brexit following publication of an updated Brexit Readiness Action Plan in September. This sets out the measures that the Government is putting in place and the steps that businesses and individuals need to take to be Brexit ready.

Budget 2021 provides around €340 million for Brexit measures, through the continuation of existing measures as well as a number of new supports. This is on top of more than €700 million of measures in successive Budgets since 2017.

In particular, the Budget provides further funding for a range of sectorial supports and additional resources for regulatory agencies, as well as a number of enhancements to existing tax-based measures in support of sectors and enterprises most affected by Brexit.

Continuing the Government's commitment to cross-border cooperation, the new PEACE PLUS programme, for which my Department has responsibility, is a positive step that will build on and continue the important work of the current PEACE and INTERREG programmes.

### **Pension Provisions**

67. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he plans to change the rules of the RTÉ pension scheme, or other similar schemes, in view of fears that there may be an effective €30 million or €500,000 per annum raid of assets of the pension savings of retired RTÉ employees and in view of the fact in 2019 he refused a 1% pension increase;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37290/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I do not have primary Ministerial responsibility for any of the commercial Semi State bodies. Under the various pension scheme rules, in the first instance, it is a matter for the Government Department under whose aegis responsibility for individual commercial semi State Bodies falls to consider and approve any changes to pension scheme rules with the consent of the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Regarding the specific issue of any possible implications for the rules of the RTÉ pension scheme arising from changes relating to annual administration fees, this is for the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to consider initially and I understand that the matter is currently under ongoing consideration by that Department.

### Sports Funding

68. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the total sports budget for each of the years 2007 and 2020, in tabular form; the breakdown of the areas the funding was allocated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37170/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The total budget for sport for each of the years 2007 and 2020 along with a breakdown of the areas to which the budget was allocated is available as part of the published Revised Estimates for each of those years.

The Revised Estimates for each year are published on the Gov.ie. website at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e20037-revised-estimates/>

### Sports Facilities

69. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if Portmarnock swimming pool and swimming pools in general will be allowed to operate at set times to allow elite swimmers preparing for future Olympic and European competitions to train given that elite athletes such as elite swimmers are allowed to train and to operate under level 5 restrictions but cannot do so without access to swimming pools [37250/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** As the country is currently in Level 5 restrictions, it is not permitted for gyms, swimming pools or leisure centres to open to the general public. The public health regulations provide for an exemption for certain categories of professional and high performance athletes and teams, including athletes in the Swim Ireland high performance programme funded by Sport Ireland. Sports facilities and training centres that would previously have provided services to elite, professional sports are permitted to remain open to facilitate ongoing training for exempted categories of sport only. This is to ensure that professional teams can continue to compete including in international competition. It is also to facilitate our high performance athletes and teams in their preparations for the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games to be held in Tokyo next year.

When opening for elite or professional athletes, facilities must adhere to comprehensive protocols, which ensure that the required levels of control and compliance are in place. These

protocols are informed by guidance from the Expert Group on Return to Sport to ensure that there is full adherence with best practice guidance from Irish health authorities, as well as international sources such as the WHO and ECDC. As the national high performance training centre, facilities at the Sport Ireland Campus in Blanchardstown will remain accessible for elite athletes only.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

70. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if swimming lessons will be re-instated during level 3 Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will take into consideration correspondence from a group (details supplied) on the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37291/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Government's Resilience and Recovery Plan 2020-2021 provides for indoor individual training only at Level 3. It also states explicitly that there should be no exercise classes at this level. My Department has issued guidance to the sports and leisure sector confirming that group swimming lessons are not permitted in Level 3. Only one-to-one swimming instruction is permitted in Level 3.

While the Government fully understands the benefits that sport brings to peoples overall health and well-being, the measures in place to suppress the disease transmission are intended to minimise the risks to public health while striking the right balance in prioritising and protecting some activities over others. Such activities include health and social care services, education and other essential needs, work and economic activity, and other key societal interests (in so far as possible) such as sports and important family gatherings.

Each level of the framework contains a "basket" of measures which are intended, collectively, to contribute to lowering risk of transmission in alignment with the risk level at that time. The set of measures, individually, do not comprise a list of activities or places which are equally safe. Instead, they are "baskets" of measures which are informed by public health understanding of the disease. The measures in place for each level reflect the prevailing disease situation and recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others.

While I am pleased to note that COVID-19 data indicates improvements across a range of indicators, which gives us hope that the epidemiological situation is once again coming under control, it is too early at this point to consider the easing of restrictions, including those currently applying to swimming pools.

### **Brexit Issues**

71. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of her Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37187/20]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Ireland regrets the UK's decision to leave the EU, although we respect it.

From 1 January 2021, many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally as we will no longer share EU membership. However, the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the

end of the transition period. Strong and vibrant connections are vital with our closest neighbour and trading partner. Both Ireland and the UK remain co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and are committed to the ongoing maintenance of the Common Travel Area and its associated rights and privileges.

It is clear that Brexit, in any form, will have significant impacts in Ireland including those sectors of the economy that come under the remit of my Department such as Tourism and Údarás na Gaeltachta supported companies. The Department of Finance has projected over the medium-term the level of GDP would be around 2% – 3.25 % lower relative to a hypothetical status quo scenario, with most of the impact in the first year or so.

As the Deputy will be aware the Minister for Foreign Affairs has responsibility for coordinating the whole-of-Government response to Brexit. In this capacity, that Department continues to working closely with colleagues across Government to address the many challenges resulting. This cooperation also involves the relevant State Agencies. The Government has been planning for Brexit since before the UK referendum to ensure that Irish citizens and businesses are as ready as possible for all possible scenarios. On 9 September, the Government published its Brexit Readiness Action Plan, which details the actions Government will take and the actions citizens and businesses should take to prepare for the end of the transition period. Citizens and businesses should now finalise their readiness work for the end of the transition period. This work will continue in the weeks ahead.

### **Broadcasting Authority of Ireland**

72. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will request the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland to provide additional sound and vision funding to the sector covering the period September 2020 to February 2021 similar to the scheme rolled out in April 2020. [37215/20]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** During 2020, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) held two closed rounds for radio, targeted at the independent commercial and community radio sectors respectively.

In June 2020, the BAI awarded €2.5m Sound and Vision funding to 32 independent commercial radio stations across the country supporting public awareness and understanding of COVID-19. This was in addition to a waiver on the broadcasting levy for the independent radio sector for Q1 and Q2 2020 which saved the sector €1m.

In addition, the BAI distributed €750,000 this year in a special round for the community radio sector.

The purpose of the Sound and Vision Scheme is to support eligible content across the broadcasting sector as a whole, ensuring a balanced and fair approach. In light of the ongoing challenges faced by the sector, I secured an additional €2m in exchequer funding for the Sound and Vision Scheme under the July Stimulus Package. This greatly enhanced the funding available for the final round of the Scheme this year (round 37), bringing its total value to €4.5m. This funding round is open to those elements of the radio sector that were not eligible for the rounds to commercial and community radio earlier in the year, namely independent audio producers and public service radio. In addition, the round is open to independent audiovisual producers, and commercial, community and public service television stations.

The Broadcasting Fund which comprises the Sound and Vision and Archiving Schemes is financed by 7% of net licence fee receipts and payments are made to the BAI monthly. The

BAI is currently finalising the most recent round and no decisions regarding 2021 rounds have been made as yet.

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

73. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason Fáilte Ireland is informing shopping centres that they are eligible for the Covid-19 adaptation fund only to discover upon submission of application that they are not. [37247/20]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The administration of the COVID-19 Adaptation Fund is an operational matter for the Board and management of Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to them for further information and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### **National Lottery Funding**

74. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent of capital or current funding provided for sporting or cultural activities in County Cork in each of the past four years both from proceeds of the national lottery and other sources; the intended future expenditure from each source for 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37340/20]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As the Deputy is aware my Department was established in June of this year bringing together functions previously under the remit of three Departments of State. Details of the annual funding allocation to my Department at subhead level are published in the annual Revised Estimates Volume. Through these subheads, my Department administers and delivers a wide range of programmes and measures, descriptions of which are available on its website while details of expenditure by Departments are available in the annual Appropriation Accounts.

Funds raised by the National Lottery are transferred to the Exchequer and are used to part-finance expenditure by various Government Departments on projects in these categories. Details of National Lottery funding received by my Department under the Sports Capital Programme and for the promotion of Art and Cultural activities sponsored by my Department are published in the annual Appropriation Accounts for this Department.

Details of exchequer capital funding provided by my Department for the provision of Sports, Culture and Arts related purposes and activities in County Cork for the period 2016 to 2020 are set out below. Details of allocations for 2021 will be published in the Revised Estimates Volume.

#### **Sports Capital Programme**

The Sports Capital Programme is part funded from the proceeds of the National Lottery however the details of all allocations and payments made each year under the programme are published annually.

#### **Cultural Schemes**

The Department operates a range of Schemes and details of expenditure as requested are

summarised below.

### Capital Funding to Cork

#### Arts & Culture Capital Scheme 2016 – 2018 (Allocated in 2017)

Organisation	Grant €
Cork Butter Museum Limited	41,424
Cork County Council / Briery Gap	250,000
Sirius Arts Centre	5,054
West Cork Arts Centre	1,272
St. Peters Cork Leisure World	7,196
Triskel Arts Centre CLG	11,960
Banteer Old School Heritage and Drama Trust (T/A Glen Theatre)	12,262
Conna Community Council	2,200
Cyclone Reparatory	9,513
Wandesford Quay Ltd (WQL)	90,842
The Everyman Palace Ltd	155,463
Cork Opera House DAC	176,288
Firkin Crane Ltd,	150,000

#### Digitisation Scheme (Allocation in 2017)

Organisation	Grant €
Crawford Art Gallery	18,000

#### Other Projects

Organisation	Grant €	Year	Project
UCC	47,818	2019	RTÉ/UCC Atlas of the Irish Revolution digital tools
RTÉ Cork /UCC	67,000	2020	The Great Hunger Online Digital Resources

#### ACCESS II Scheme payments made between 2017-date

Organisation	Grant/payment made	Scheme	Year payment made
Cork County Council (re West Cork Arts Centre)	€500,000	ACCESS II	2017
Cork County Council (re West Cork Arts Centre)	86,591	ACCESS II	2018

#### Creative Ireland Programme

Under Pillar 2 of the Creative Ireland Programme – “Enabling Creativity in Every Community” – my Department and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government provide funding to each of the 31 local authorities to enable them to implement their individual Culture and Creativity Strategies and support an extensive programme of activities, events and initiatives in each county. For example, for the period 2018 - 2020, this equated to an individual annual local authority allocation of €96,774.

In 2020, my Department also provided additional funding for local authorities through the Creative Ireland Programme for further initiatives and projects. In Cork County, this included

an allocation of €50,000 under the July Stimulus Package and €12,500 under the Positive Ageing and Creative Wellbeing scheme. Cork City Council were also allocated €50,000 under the July Stimulus Package and €15,000 under the Positive Ageing and Creative Wellbeing scheme.

It should also be noted that my Department, through the Creative Ireland Programme, additionally provides an annual allocation to each local authority to support the delivery of Cruinniú na nÓg – the national day of free creative activities for children and young people under 18 years, at local level.

Through the Creative Ireland Programme, funding provided to Cork City Council and Cork County Council for the period 2017-2020 is set out in the table below.

Year	Cork City Council Allocation	Cork County Allocation
2017	€64,516	€64,516
2018	€145,755	€104,153
2019	€125,774	€120,551
2020	€204,760	€176,457
Total	€540,805	€465,677

### Funding to Cork 2016 to 2020

Year	Scheme	Organisation	Funding Allocated
2016	Co-operation with Northern Ireland Funding Scheme	Munster Literature Centre	€1,500
2016	Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme	The Glucksman	€ 6,375
2016	Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme	Cork Butter Museum	€ 1,361
2016	Local Festivals & Summer Schools Funding Scheme	Ballydehob Festival	€ 1,500
2016	Culture Night	Cork County Council	€ 8,000
2016	Culture Night	Cork City Council	€ 10,000
2017	Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme	The Glucksman	€ 10,000
2017	Culture Night	Cork County Council	€ 10,000
2017	Culture Night	Cork City Council	€ 10,000
2018	Culture Night	Cork County Council	€ 10,000
2018	Culture Night	Cork City Council	€ 10,000
2018	Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme	The Glucksman	€ 15,000
2018	Local Festivals & Summer Schools Funding Scheme	Foróige	€ 1,000
2019	Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme	The Glucksman	€ 10,000
2019	Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme	Cork Butter Museum	€ 7,500
2019	Local Festivals & Summer Schools Funding Scheme	Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann	€ 1,500
2019	Culture Night	Cork County Council	€ 10,000
2019	Culture Night	Cork City Council	€ 10,000
2020	Audience Engagement Fund	Passage West Maritime Museum	€ 6,900
2020	Audience Engagement Fund	Nano Nagle Place	€ 20,000
2020	Audience Engagement Fund	Clonakilty Enterprise Board CLG	€ 12,000
2020	Audience Engagement Fund	Cork Public Museum	€ 15,000
2020	Audience Engagement Fund	Coiste Forbartha	€ 10,000
2020	Regional Museum Exhibition Scheme	Sirus Arts Centre	€ 7,000

### Annual Funding under Regional Museums, Galleries, Cultural Centres and Projects

	Cork Butter Museum
2016	€ 30,000
2017	€ 35,000
2018	€ 40,000

	Cork Butter Museum
2019	€ 40,000
2020	€ 60,000

### Údarás na Gaeltachta

75. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the supports Údarás na Gaeltacht can provide to small businesses in Gaeltacht areas that want to start up or expand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37353/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Údarás na Gaeltachta can provide a range of financial incentives in the form of grant assistance to assist start-up companies. Support incentives include:

#### Start Up Assistance

- Feasibility Study grants are paid towards assessing the viability of business idea. Costs associated with market research, development of prototype, consultancy and other overheads incurred as a result of the study may be included.

- Development of Micro-Enterprise Scheme offers funding to eligible start-up businesses towards the costs associated with capital expenditure.

- ‘Chéad Chéim’ Scheme (First Steps) provides funding towards the initial costs associated with starting a business.

- Innovation Voucher Scheme provides vouchers worth €5,000 to assist early stage companies to work with a registered college or knowledge provider to explore a business opportunity or solve a technical problem.

- Mentor Scheme provides support for a business mentor to assist in the start-up phase or to advise on specific areas of a business plan.

- Competitive Start Fund is designed to assist the development of a high potential start-up company or individual entrepreneur to investigate the viability of a new business venture. It is available through an open call process through Enterprise Ireland.

#### Company Expansion Supports

- Capital grants are paid towards initial investment in material and tangible assets such as building, plant and machinery and assets created by the transfer of technology through the acquisition of patent rights, licences, know-how or unpatented technical knowledge.

- Employment grants provide support towards the recruitment of additional employees.

- Training grants provide assistance for training programmes that train or up-skill employees.

- Share Capital Investment - An tÚdarás can take an equity stake in small and medium enterprises in the start-up and expansion phases where this is of strategic importance to the development of the enterprise.

#### Marketing and Export Supports

- Market Development includes grants such as Strategic Marketing Review, Market Ac-

cess, Internationalisation and Business Links supports towards the costs of researching and exploring new and/or existing international business opportunities.

- Graduates 4 International Growth Programme matches graduates with companies to develop and execute plans to grow in key markets and provides support towards the graduate salary and training.

#### Research and Development and Innovation Supports

- RD&I Grant Support provides support to commercially focused, industry led projects in innovating services, products and processes.

- Innovation Vouchers and Partnerships assistance is available for companies to work with a registered college or knowledge provider to explore a business opportunity or solve a technical problem.

- Horizon 2020 and other EU Research Funding Programmes.

- Innovation 4 Growth is targeted at ambitious companies seeking to drive growth through innovation.

#### Management Development Supports

- Mentor grants can be used to investigate the feasibility of developing a new product, process, technology or service offering.

- Strategic Consultancy grants support the cost of planning or implementing a new strategic development initiative.

- Key Manager grants offer support towards the cost of hiring a Key Manager, critical to the company's future development and who introduces key skills and expertise to the company's senior management team.

- Platform 4 Growth / Leadership 4 Growth are designed to challenge SMEs/larger companies to scale and grow their business.

#### Productivity and Business Process Improvement Supports

- Lean Start, Lean Plus and Lean Transform grants help companies to improve and increase performance and competitiveness by undertaking 'Lean' assignments. Eligible costs include fees for an external Lean consultant/trainer and employee training and associated costs.

- GreenStart & GreenPlus grants are offered to assist companies in adopting greener strategies in areas such as resource efficiency (energy, waste, water) and reductions in carbon footprint.

- Business Process Improvement Grants support short-term company projects that are designed to develop management capability and drive company efficiencies and business process improvements. Eligible projects include LeanPlus or GreenPlus.

Údarás na Gaeltachta also offer an extensive range of specific Covid-19 and Brexit related supports in line with other state agencies. Further details regarding the supports which can be provided to small business in Gaeltacht regions can be accessed of course by contacting Údarás na Gaeltachta directly.

76. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if an application by a person (details supplied) will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37299/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The application referred to in the Deputy's question is a matter for the Commissioner of Valuation, who is independent in the exercise of his functions under the Valuation Act 2001 to 2020. I, as Minister, have no function in decisions in this regard.

Notwithstanding this, I am informed by the Commissioner of Valuation that the application is receiving attention and will be finalised shortly.

Arrangements have been put in place by all bodies under the aegis of my Department to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. The contact email address for the Valuation Office (VO) is [oireachtas.enquiries@VALOFF.ie](mailto:oireachtas.enquiries@VALOFF.ie) This provides a speedy, efficient and cost effective system through which the VO can address queries of this kind.

### Brexit Issues

77. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37181/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Brexit poses an unprecedented challenge for Ireland. Failure to reach agreement on a trade deal will be very damaging all round but even with a trade deal in place, there will be substantial challenges for supply chains and trade flows. From 1 January 2021, every time Irish companies or individuals import from or export to Great Britain they will need, at a minimum, to complete a customs declaration.

In the absence of a trade deal, we will see the introduction of tariffs and quotas on trade, in both directions, on top of the customs checks and controls. These impacts will apply across all sectors and it is, therefore, difficult to identify positives for any policy or sectoral issue under my remit.

Regardless of the outcome of the ongoing negotiations, significant and lasting changes will arise from 1 January 2021. On that basis, the Government published an updated Brexit Readiness Action Plan on 9 September. A focus of the campaign has been on drawing the attention of businesses to the changes that will arise in moving goods from the end of the transition period. Additional sector-specific messages are also being communicated. In that regard, my Department held the latest of a series of engagements with the construction sector on 4 November, to highlight the changes that will apply in respect of construction products. We have published an FAQ document, available at: [https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/faqs\\_construction\\_industry\\_preparing\\_for\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_brexit\\_transition\\_period.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/faqs_construction_industry_preparing_for_the_end_of_the_brexit_transition_period.pdf)

### Home Loan Scheme

78. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the policy with respect to the provision of mortgage protection for Rebuilding Ireland home loan applicants; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some successful loan applicants

cannot secure mortgage protection due to illness or disability issues; and the mechanism there is for applicants to appeal a decision on the designated mortgage protection policy in which they believe the medical or disability grounds for that refusal are not valid. [37218/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The local authority mortgage protection insurance (MPI) scheme has applied to all house purchase loans approved by local authorities after 1 July 1986, including the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan introduced on 1 February 2018. Mortgage protection insurance is charged at the rate of 0.555%.

It is obligatory for all local authority borrowers who meet the eligibility criteria to join the scheme, which is a group policy. Altering this condition would have a negative impact on the scheme and increase the cost for all existing borrowers.

A local authority housing loan applicant who is not eligible for the local authority MPI scheme must source a suitable comparable individual MPI policy from the market. The level of coverage/benefits provided under the alternative MPI should be similar to that available under the Local Authority Group MPI.

The final decision on loan approval is a matter for each local authority and its Credit Committee on a case-by-case basis. Decisions on all housing loan applications must be made in accordance with the statutory credit policy that underpins the scheme, in order to ensure consistency of treatment for all applicants.

### **Local Authority Housing**

79. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will ensure that councils that are not able to meet the deadline for home acquisition and renovation by the end of 2020 have the deadline extended due to the delays in the programme due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37316/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Acquisition of properties for social housing purposes by local authorities are part of their delivery approach, focusing on priority situations as part of an overall strategy tailored to meet local needs effectively. Where renovation works are required, these should be carried out without delay to ensure that home is available for letting as speedily as possible.

Local authorities are working to deliver their acquisition programmes for this year and it is important that they are delivered. If any individual local authority has a particular issue with their acquisitions programme, they should contact my Department on the precise issue, without delay.

In Budget 2021, the total funding being made available for the delivery of housing programmes is €3.3bn. A major focus of this investment will be the overall target of 9,500 new build social homes, with a further 800 social homes to be delivered through strategic acquisitions and 2,450 under the various leasing programmes.

With the priority being on advancing and completing the significant social housing build programme that is underway, it is important that acquisitions undertaken in 2020 should, in so far as possible, be finalised and funded this year.

### **Tenant Purchase Scheme**

80. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of tenant purchase scheme applications received by Kerry County Council since the launch of the new scheme in January 2016; the number disallowed due to the fact they could not meet the income threshold; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37329/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme came into operation on 1 January 2016. The Scheme is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year

Section 63(3) of the Local Government Act 2001 provides that, subject to law, a local authority is independent in the performance of its functions. The Minister is precluded by housing legislation from intervening in relation to the procedures followed, or decisions made, by local authorities in relation to the operation of the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme.

As my Department does not routinely collate information on the number of tenant purchase applications made or refused, the data requested by the Deputy is not held by my Department. Data on the number of tenant purchases (sale of dwellings by local authorities) completed is available at:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/attachments/311-sale-la-hse-area-1994-2019.xlsx>

A review of the first 12 months of the Scheme's operation has been undertaken. In addition, the Programme for Government commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own home with some changes to eligibility. The review and the commitments in the Programme for Government are being examined as part of the work on the broader social housing reform agenda. I expect to be in a position to finalise changes to the Scheme once the work on these reform measures is complete.

## **Foreign Policy**

81. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions that have been had at European Council level on the ongoing security crisis in Hong Kong; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37672/20]

89. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the detainment of a group of 12 activists aged between 16 and 30 years of age from Hong Kong by the People's Republic of China; if he has raised this issue with the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37318/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 81 and 89 together.

I am aware of the concerning situation in Hong Kong, including the detaining of a number of activists following the adoption of national security legislation in the region. I made a statement on 1 July to express Ireland's concern in relation to the adoption of this law, and the situation has been raised directly with the Chinese Ambassador to Ireland.

The EU has made a number of statements in relation to this situation, most recently on 12

November following the disqualification of members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council. This statement reiterated our concern regarding Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy under the One Country, Two Systems principle, and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms in Hong Kong.

In addition to this, the Council of the EU adopted Conclusions on Hong Kong on 28 July 2020 in response to the adoption of the National Security Law. These set out a coordinated package of response measures in various fields, including the operation of Member States' extradition agreements and other relevant agreements with Hong Kong. In line with these Conclusions, the Government agreed on 13 October to suspend Ireland's Extradition Agreement with Hong Kong.

This decision, which was taken in concert with a number of other EU Member States, clearly signals Ireland's concerns in relation to the rule of law in Hong Kong and the erosion of judicial independence promised under the One Country, Two Systems principle.

My Department, through our Consulate General in Hong Kong and our Embassy in Beijing, will remain alert to the situation in Hong Kong and, along with our EU partners, will continue to raise our concerns with Chinese authorities.

### **Brexit Issues**

82. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37178/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Ireland regrets the UK's decision to leave the EU, although we respect it.

From 1 January 2021, many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally as we will no longer share EU membership. However, the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the end of the transition period. Strong and vibrant connections are vital with our closest neighbour and trading partner. Both Ireland and the UK remain co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and are committed to the ongoing maintenance of the Common Travel Area and its associated rights and privileges.

The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Johnson at their meeting in Belfast on 13 August, have already discussed the importance of nurturing and developing the bilateral relationship in a structured way in the context where the UK has left the EU.

While we will work with our UK colleagues on strengthening this relationship, it is also clear that Brexit, in any form, will have significant impacts in Ireland. The Department of Finance has projected over the medium-term the level of GDP would be around 2% – 3.25 % lower relative to a hypothetical status quo scenario, with most of the impact in the first year or so.

The Brexit transition period will end in 43 days. Whatever the outcome of the ongoing future partnership negotiations, the UK will be outside the EU's Single Market and Customs Union, and EU law will longer apply to or in the UK. This will bring significant and lasting change in the relationship between the EU and UK from 1 January, 2021. Any business that moves goods from, to or through the UK, excluding Northern Ireland, will be subject to a range of new customs formalities, SPS checks and other regulatory requirements that do not apply in

any form to such trade today. However, the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland means that these checks will not apply to trade between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Failure to conclude a FTA will see the EU and UK trade on WTO terms and the introduction of tariffs and quotas.

The Government has been planning for Brexit since before the UK referendum to ensure that Irish citizens and businesses are as ready as possible for all possible scenarios. On 9 September, the Government published its Brexit Readiness Action Plan, which details the actions Government will take and the actions citizens and businesses should take to prepare for the end of the transition period. Citizens and businesses should now finalise their readiness work for the end of the transition period. This work will continue in the weeks ahead.

## **Human Rights**

83. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Government will actively support and contribute to the development of an ambitious, effective and binding UN treaty on business and human rights with a strong gender perspective and inclusion of human rights defenders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37204/20]

84. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will follow the lead of other EU member states, such as France, and directly address the negotiation sessions on priority areas in the UN treaty on business and human rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37205/20]

85. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide details on the way the constructive position of Ireland on the UN treaty on business and human rights is being developed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37206/20]

86. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will commit to take action within the EU to ensure a clear, constructive negotiation mandate for the next OEIGWG session to be held in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37207/20]

87. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the work being undertaken to develop domestic legislation for mandatory, gender responsive human rights and environmental due diligence legislation here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37208/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 83 to 87, inclusive, together.

The sixth session of the Open Ended Inter-Governmental Working Group on Transnational Corporations and other Business Enterprises took place from 26th-30th October 2020. The European Union delivered a statement and separately raised specific concerns in relation to the draft text on behalf of Ireland and other Member States.

The EU statement welcomed some of the changes in the latest draft of the Legally Binding Instrument; highlighted further necessary changes; and outlined the many measures underway within the EU and across Member States to give greater protection to human rights in the context of business activities. France was the only EU Member State to intervene and all statements are publicly available on the website of the UN Human Rights Council.

As stated previously, Ireland remains open to looking at options for progress on a legally binding treaty. With regard to scope, we believe that all economic operators, whether transnational or purely domestic, should be treated in a non-discriminatory manner. We would also wish to see essential human rights principles, including gender equality and protection of human rights defenders, reflected in any possible instrument which should reaffirm the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights and stress the primary responsibility of States under existing human rights obligations to protect against human rights violations.

As I have previously stated, any new initiative should build on, rather than duplicate, existing measures such as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy. Above all it should be rooted in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to which Ireland is firmly committed. We have provided input on all of these issues during deliberations at EU level to develop the EU position in advance of the latest meeting of the OEWG. I will consider whether making an intervention at national level at the next meeting in 2021, in addition to contributing to the EU position and statement, could be useful in further highlighting these priorities.

Ultimately, if it is to achieve its objectives, any legally binding instrument should enjoy broad support among UN Member States to ensure its effectiveness as well as international coherence in the framework of business and human rights.

Ireland is one of a small number of UN Member States which have adopted National Plans on Business and Human Rights. I am also pleased to note that the forthcoming EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy will contain strong commitments in the area of Business and Human Rights.

Let me therefore assure the Deputy that we will continue to play a constructive role to advance the business and human rights agenda both within the EU and the UN. My officials in Dublin and Geneva have also met with the Irish Coalition on Business and Human Rights and this engagement will continue.

In respect of the potential for domestic legislation, I am aware that the European Union Commissioner for Justice is preparing a legislative initiative for 2021, which may introduce mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence across value chains. While these policy matters fall outside of the remit of my own Department, my officials are following these important developments closely.

## Northern Ireland

88. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will use the various diplomatic channels open to him to ensure a commissioner is appointed to the Commission for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland. [37275/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Government is committed to working with the UK Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland to address the painful legacy of the Troubles through the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement framework. A key part of this work is meeting the legitimate needs of victims and survivors in Northern Ireland and across the island of Ireland.

It is for the First and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, acting jointly, to appoint the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. The role of Commissioner is an essential and ongoing one as a voice for those victims and families directly affected by violence in Northern

Ireland, ensuring that their needs and perspectives are fully taken into account in any legislation or other measures that address the legacy of the Troubles.

In our ongoing engagement with the British Government, the Northern Ireland parties and other key stakeholders on the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement and dealing with the legacy of the past, we will continue to seek to support a collective way forward that meets the needs of victims and their families, and society as a whole.

*Question No. 89 answered with Question No. 81.*

### **Passport Services**

90. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the services being provided by the Passport Office at present in view of Covid-19 to process passport applications; if an outline of same will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37356/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Passport Service has paused processing of routine applications while Ireland is at Level 5 of the National Framework for Living with COVID-19.

The Passport Service continues to provide an emergency passport service for Irish citizens at home and abroad. The service is available for those who are required to travel due to the death or serious illness of a family member or because the applicant requires emergency medical treatment.

Applicants who require a passport for emergency purposes, or to travel for urgent reasons, should contact the Passport Service via our Customer Service Hub Webchat function on our website.

The Passport Service has a comprehensive plan in place to resume all services, in line with the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. This provides for the resumption of processing of routine applications received via the online service at Level 4. The Passport Service plans to resume processing of routine paper based applications such as Passport Express, Northern Ireland Passport Express and applications for Foreign Birth Registrations at Level 3.

### **Middle East**

91. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the recent death in an Israeli prison of a Palestinian detainee (details supplied) who died from the medical negligence of their cancer; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that the Israeli state has also withheld their remains from their family in an act of collective punishment; if he will write to the Israeli Ambassador in Ireland to call upon the government of Israel to immediately release the remains of the person to their family for a proper funeral; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37357/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Ireland continues to raise concerns about the treatment of Palestinian prisoners.

Ireland has repeatedly recalled to Israel the applicability of international human rights standards and international humanitarian law in respect of detainees, in particular obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention. During the Universal Periodic Review of Israel at the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, Ireland made a recommendation to Israel regarding the treatment

of detainees. I have raised these issues myself on my visits to the region.

With regard to the specific case the Deputy mentions, Irish officials are aware of this case and have been following it closely.

Ireland and the EU provide financial support to Israeli and Palestinian NGOs who are active in bringing these issues to light, including in respect of this case.

### **Defence Forces Deployment**

92. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Defence the role of members of the Permanent Defence Force during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37273/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Whilst the Defence Forces are not a primary response agency for non-security related emergencies, as defined in the Framework for Major Emergency Management, they provide the fullest possible assistance to the appropriate Lead Department in the event of a natural disaster or emergency situation in its Aid to Civil Authority (ATCA) role. In this regard, the full spectrum of Defence Forces personnel and equipment, commensurate with operational requirements, is made available for deployments, within current means and capabilities, as the need arises.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Joint Task Force was established to coordinate the Defence Forces contribution to the whole-of-Government COVID-19 response. It has the authority to draw together, in a joint manner, the contribution of all of the elements of the Defence Forces – Army, Air Corps, Naval Service, Reserve, etc. This was provided for in a Defence Forces Regulation signed by and under the authority of the Minister for Defence.

The Defence Forces Joint Task Force is based in McKee Barracks and its priority from the beginning has been to provide support to the HSE, while retaining, at all times, a contingent capacity to provide Aid to the Civil Power support. The wide range of supports that the Defence Forces have provided to the HSE, as coordinated by the Joint Task Force during the COVID-19 crisis include:

- operation of the COVID-19 testing centre at the Aviva stadium;
- support for contact tracing efforts;
- transportation by the Air Corps of COVID-19 tests to Germany;
- collection of PPE from more than 260 cargo flights and the ongoing storage and distribution of this PPE to various HSE sites;
- support for HSE testing efforts including through deployment of Naval Service vessels to Dublin, Cork and Galway;
- PPE training to workers at Cork and Waterford harbours by Naval service personnel;
- provision of tentage and marshalling support at various HSE testing sites around the country;
- transportation of patients for testing;
- assistance with the fit out of temporary facilities for the HSE (for example, the HSE facilities at City West and the University of Limerick);

- production and assembly of PPE using 3D printing facilities; and
- the use of lands at Ballymullen Barracks as a COVID-19 testing facility and contact tracing hub.

In addition to supporting the HSE, the Defence Forces have also provided a broad range of support to other Departments and Agencies. Provision of this support was also coordinated by the Joint Task Force and examples include:

- Support has been provided to the National Ambulance Service through Defence Forces ambulance and crew supports along with tele-triage supports.
- Support to the Office of Government Procurement through assistance with storage and distribution of PPE.
- Support to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government through the use of lands at Sarsfields Barracks for the location of one of the National Temporary Body Storage Facilities. The Defence Forces were also on standby to provide support if required at the Dublin based National Temporary Body Storage Facility at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham.

### **Brexit Issues**

93. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Defence his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37173/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Ireland regrets the UK's decision to leave the EU, although we respect it.

From 1 January 2021, many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally as we will no longer share EU membership. However, the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the end of the transition period. Strong and vibrant connections are vital with our closest neighbour and trading partner. Both Ireland and the UK remain co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and are committed to the ongoing maintenance of the Common Travel Area and its associated rights and privileges.

The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Johnson at their meeting in Belfast on 13 August, have already discussed the importance of nurturing and developing the bilateral relationship in a structured way in the context where the UK has left the EU.

The Brexit transition period will end in 43 days. Whatever the outcome of the ongoing future partnership negotiations, this will bring significant and lasting change in the relationship between the EU and UK from 1 January, 2021.

In 2015, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed relating to defence cooperation between Ireland and UK. This MoU provides a framework for developing and furthering bilateral co-operation and relations between the two states in the area of security and defence capacity, building on existing cooperation and seeking to identify new areas of cooperation with mutual benefits. It is a voluntary, non-binding arrangement and does not impact on Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality.

Areas covered by the MoU include exercises, training activities, exchange of information, knowledge and experience, shared threat analysis, staff to staff talks both civil and military and

joint operations and capacity building in support of international peace and security.

It is important that we maintain and develop the positive progress that has taken place so far. Any bilateral Ireland/UK cooperation on areas of mutual interest and concern in the defence and armed forces domain will remain in place post-Brexit and the MoU will continue to facilitate cooperation between Ireland and the UK in the agreed areas into the future.

Supplementary written arrangements in the form of MOUs, Technical Arrangements etc. may be concluded between Ireland and the UK for the purpose of implementing this cooperation. To this end, a Memorandum of Understanding concerning the sharing of and protection of Defence classified information was concluded between Ireland and the UK in 2019.

The Department of Defence has not identified any areas where cooperation or coordination will be enhanced by Brexit.

### Defence Forces Properties

94. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Defence the premises owned or run by the Defence Forces at present in counties Cavan, Monaghan and Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37352/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Defence property portfolio consists of a diverse range of facilities from conventional military barracks to forts, camps, married quarters and training lands. At the end of 2019, the portfolio consisted of some 70 sites, including 14 permanently occupied military installations, together with lands comprising over 20,000 acres.

The specific information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below.

Location	Property
County Cavan	Cavan Town - RDF premises
County Monaghan	N/A
County Meath	Gormanston (Camp and Aerodrome) RDF premises - Navan.

### Defence Forces Remuneration

95. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Defence the regulations and legislation that governs the rates of pay for members of the Reserve Defence Force; the regulations or legislation that implements a 10% cut compared to the equivalent Permanent Defence Force pay rates; the date such regulation or legislation implementing the cuts was signed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37379/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The provisions for pay and allowances for both the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) and the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) are set out in Defence Force Regulation S.3.

The rates of pay for members of the RDF is calculated in line with the rates of pay for members of the PDF. As per Defence Force Regulations, the rate of pay for the RDF is linked with first point of the scale of the rate of pay for the PDF.

Prior to the Financial Emergency, the pay scales applying to the PDF also applied to the RDF. Under FEMPI measures, the pay cuts that applied to the PDF also applied to the RDF. An additional 10% reduction applied to the rate of paid training for members of the RDF, as per

the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA) – 2013-2016 (Haddington Road Agreement) in May 2013.

The restoration of pay for Public Servants, including for members of the Defence Forces, has been conducted in accordance with PSSA 2013 - 2018 and PSSA 2018 – 2020, with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. However, the additional 10% reduction under the Haddington Road Agreement is not included in these restorations. This matter is currently under consideration.

Notwithstanding this, I note that, as members of the PDF continue to contribute to the Government's response to the current COVID 19 response, some members of the RDF who have skills required in that response, and whose personal circumstances have allowed them to do so, have undertaken authorised tasks on a voluntary basis, in support of the PDF. RDF members voluntarily involved in such activities receive the equivalent rates of pay as PDF personnel.

### **School Transport**

96. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education if flexibility can be shown in the case of a family (details provided) that missed the deadline for the application for the remote area transport grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37151/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

The closing date for applying for school transport in any given year is the last Friday in April for the new school year. Therefore the closing date for applications for the 2020/2021 was Friday 24 April 2020.

A child who is eligible for school transport but for whom no transport service is available may, following an application for transport within the prescribed time limits, receive a Remote Area Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements.

Bus Éireann has advised that an application for school transport for the family referred to by the Deputy was received on the 1st May 2020 and therefore payment of a Remote Area Grant cannot be considered for the current school year.

### **Brexit Issues**

97. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of her Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37174/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Brexit will bring change in terms of managing relationships between education systems, North and South, and East West. While many of the potential negative impacts of Brexit in terms of education have been mitigated through

the Memorandum of Understanding on the Common Travel Area, my Department's focus has been on protecting and strengthening the collaboration between our education systems.

### **School Enrolments**

98. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the obligations schools are under to accept a student in the catchment area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37193/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The question of enrolment in individual schools, including the setting of catchment areas are the responsibility of the school authorities. It is the responsibility of the school authorities of schools to implement an enrolment policy in accordance with the Education Act 1998 and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018.

My Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking places. Parents have the right to choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available the pupil should be admitted. However, in schools where there are more applicants than places available a selection process may be necessary.

This selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants. However, it may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in their school of first choice. In this regard, school authorities may find it necessary to prioritise enrolment of children from particular areas or on the basis of some other criterion.

New schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand are required, in the first instance, to prioritise pupil applications from within the designated school planning area(s) which the school was established to serve. This does not preclude schools from enrolling pupils from outside of the school planning area where they have sufficient places, rather it reflects the need to accommodate in the first instance the demographic for which the school was established.

The requirement on new schools established since 2011 to prioritise enrolment from a particular school planning area(s) does not apply to or impact on the majority of existing schools established prior to 2011.

### **School Enrolments**

99. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the rights a student has if they are refused a place at any of the available schools in their catchment area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37194/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** It is the responsibility of my Department to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in an area. Parents/guardians can choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available the pupil should be admitted.

It is the responsibility of the managerial authorities of all schools to draft, publish and implement a school admission policy in accordance with the Education Acts 1998 to 2018. In schools where there are more applicants than places available a selection process may be necessary. This may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in their school of first choice.

The admission policy, including the selection criterion to be used where the school is over-subscribed, must comply with the Education Acts 1998 to 2018, be non-discriminatory and be applied fairly in respect of all applicants.

Where a board of management make a decision to refuse admission, a parent/guardian can appeal that decision under section 29 of the Education Act, 1998, and an independent appeals committee will be appointed to consider the appeal. My Department has no authority to compel a school to admit a student, except in circumstances where an appeal under section 29 of the Education Act, 1998 has been allowed and the appeals committee directs that the school admit the child concerned.

A section 29 appeal must be made no later than 63 calendar days from the date of the school's decision to refuse admission.

If a student has been refused admission due to the school being oversubscribed, and the parent/guardian of the student wishes to appeal this decision they must firstly make a written request to the school seeking a review of the board of management's decision. This request for a review to the board of management is time bound and must be made within 21 calendar days from the date of the decision by the school to refuse admission the student.

If a student has been refused admission for a reason other than the school being oversubscribed, the parent/guardian may, but is not required to, request a review by the board of management within 21 calendar days from the date of the decision by the school to refuse admission to the student. Where refused admission is for a reason other than the school being oversubscribed and the parent/guardian does not choose to seek a review by the board of management, an appeal may be made to an independent appeals committee no later than 63 calendar days from the date of the school's decision to refuse admission.

Full details on the section 29 appeals process are available on my Department's website at the link below:

*[www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Appeal-against-Permanent-Exclusion-Suspension-or-Refusal-to-Enrol/Appeals.html](http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Appeal-against-Permanent-Exclusion-Suspension-or-Refusal-to-Enrol/Appeals.html)*.

In addition, Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) the Educational Welfare Service is the legal body which can assist parents who are experiencing difficulty in securing a school placement for their child. Contact details for TESS are available at the following link [www.tusla.ie/tess/get-in-touch/](http://www.tusla.ie/tess/get-in-touch/) or by email at [tessinfo@tusla.ie](mailto:tessinfo@tusla.ie).

### **Special Educational Needs**

100. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if she will review a matter (details supplied); if her Department has any plans to change the criteria for schools; if she will review same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37239/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. Next year, over 20% of the total Education budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special educational needs.

This investment will support the provision of over 1,200 additional special class places.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and

advising on the education provision for children nationwide. It has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents. NCSE seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education placements.

NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally, to meet identified need. This process is ongoing.

Through better planning at both national and local level, it is my objective that specialist education places should come on stream to meet emerging demand on a timely basis. The active collaboration of school communities is essential in this regard.

Currently, my Department does not have a policy supporting the establishment of special classes in fee-charging schools.

In establishing a special class, the NCSE is required to satisfy itself that the class is both sustainable and available to all of the pupils who may need special class placements in a particular area.

As Minister, I also have powers under Section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional places but this power is only used as a last resort and where all reasonable efforts have failed.

Parents should be advised to contact their local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO) if they experience any difficulty in getting a suitable placement.

NCSE is also currently undertaking Policy Advice on Education Provision in Special Classes and Special Schools to examine whether placement in specialist settings brings about improved educational outcomes and experiences, relative to their ability, for students with special educational needs.

This Policy Advice is to be completed and a report submitted by NCSE in December 2020. It will then be considered by my Department.

### **Public Sector Pay**

101. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the number of second-level teachers who had pay deductions and losses imposed arising from strike action by a union (details supplied) on 4 February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37308/20]

102. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the number of teachers in the voluntary secondary school sector who had pay deductions and losses imposed arising from strike action by a union (details supplied) on 4 February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37309/20]

103. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the number of teachers in the community school sector who had pay deductions and losses imposed arising from strike action by a union (details supplied) on 4 February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37310/20]

104. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the number of teachers in the comprehensive school sector who had pay deductions and losses imposed arising from strike action by a union (details supplied) on 4 February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37311/20]

106. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the number of teachers in the Educate Together school sector who had pay deductions and losses imposed arising from strike action by a union (details supplied) on 4 February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37313/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 101 to 104, inclusive, and 106 together.

Officials from my Department are collating the information that is available from the payroll databases on the matter raised by the Deputy. I will arrange for the information to be forwarded direct to him as soon as possible.

### **Public Sector Pay**

105. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the number of teachers in the ETB school sector who had pay deductions and losses imposed arising from strike action by a union (details supplied) on 4 February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37312/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department does not currently have all the information requested to hand.

While my Department is moving to a payroll shared services model for ETBs

through the Education Shared Business Services, some of the ETBs still manage and

administer their own individual payrolls. My Department will make contact with the ETBs to compile the requested information. This information will be forwarded to the Deputy's office as soon as it is collated.

*Question No. 106 answered with Question No. 101.*

### **Minor Works Scheme**

107. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if additional funding will be provided to a school (details supplied) in County Kerry to paint games lines on its newly laid play area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37315/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I would like to inform the Deputy that the school in question should use its Minor Works Grant to complete these works; minor works payments issued to primary schools during July and a further payment will issue in December of this year. Alternatively the school may apply under my Department's Summer Works Scheme when it next opens for applications.

### **Schools Data**

108. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and secondary school places in Greystones, County Wicklow; and the projections as to potential demand for places in the coming years. [37334/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware, in order to

plan for school provision my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where a demand for additional school places will arise.

Included in the data analysed is Child Benefit data and, for the purpose of post primary school place projections, current enrolments in primary schools in the relevant school planning area(s). Also considered is information provided by local authorities in respect of residential development activity in each area, in order to anticipate emerging school place requirements from any planned additional population.

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

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

Since April 2018 the Government has announced 47 new schools to be established over the period 2019-2022 including a new 1000 pupil post primary school in 2020 as a regional solution to serve the Kilcoole and Greystones school planning areas. The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years, including those which may arise in the Greystones area is currently at an advanced stage.

Enrolment information for the 2020 school year is not yet available. However details of the enrolments for 2019 are available on my Department's website *www.education.ie*.

### **School Enrolments**

109. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to a significant shortfall in available school places for both junior infants in primary schools and first year students in secondary schools in Greystones, County Wicklow; and her plans to review the matter. [37351/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that it is the responsibility of the managerial authorities of all schools to implement an enrolment policy in accordance with the Education Act 1998. In schools where there are more applicants than places available, a selection process may be necessary.

The selection process used by schools and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants. However, it may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in their school of first choice.

In accordance with the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools have drafted new policies to be published on the school's website.

The act requires schools to clearly set out their selection criteria for application in the event of oversubscription, in their admission policies. The criteria to be applied by schools and the order of priority are a matter for the schools themselves.

Further information on the new admission process is available on the Department's website at [www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/School-Enrolment](http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/School-Enrolment).

In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System (GIS). The GIS uses data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit Data from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the Department's own school enrolment databases, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise.

The process has been strengthened this year through three specific initiatives:

1. Enhanced engagement with local authorities in relation to the information on residential development incorporated in the analysis process;

2. Additional engagement with patron bodies in relation to their local knowledge on school place requirements, Education and Training Boards, Diocesan offices and national patron bodies such as Educate Together, An Foras Pátrúnachta etc. can also be an important source of local knowledge. This will add to information also provided to the Department by local authorities or individual schools.

3. Utilising the information gleaned from schools under the national inventory of school capacity completed by individual schools last year as part of POD, P-POD returns process.

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

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

As the Deputy will be aware, since April 2018, the Government announced plans for the establishment of 45 new schools over the 4 year period 2019 to 2022. This included a new primary school, Greystones Community National School, which was established in 2015. A new post-primary school, Greystones Community College opened in Greystones for the 2020/21 school year as a regional solution for the Kilcoole and Greystones area.

The following post-primary schools serve the Greystones School Planning Area:

- Temple Carrig Secondary School, Greystones – this is a co-educational school with capacity for 750 pupils and was established in 2014.

- St. David's Secondary School Greystones is a co-educational school and a major building project to expand the school to cater for 750 pupils commenced on site in October 2020. This project is expected to be completed in 22 months i.e. by July 2023.

- Greystones Community College – this new school was established in September 2020. The proposal is to provide permanent accommodation for 1,000 pupils when the school is fully developed. Discussions are ongoing with the landowner of a designated site at Charlesland, Greystones with a view to acquiring the site to construct the new school.

Greystones Community College opened its doors to 64 first year pupils in September 2020 in interim accommodation in Greystones Lawn Tennis Club. My Department is looking at all

potential options in the area in the short and medium term ahead of the school's move to its designated permanent site in Charlesland, Greystones. This will include the provision of appropriate temporary accommodation, including specialist rooms, as quickly as possible as the current school year progresses. My officials will continue to work closely with Kildare Wicklow ETB and the school to ensure that the needs of the school community are met.

In addition, there is the existing school in the adjacent Kilcoole School Planning Area, Coláiste Craobh Abhann, which currently has accommodation for 750 pupils and for which there is a major project approved to expand the school to 1,000 pupils. This project is in early architectural planning and is being delivered by the National Development Finance Agency. Additional temporary accommodation was approved in 2019 to cater for expanding enrolments pending completion of this extension. It is open to the school's patron to submit an application for additional interim accommodation to my Department should this be required.

Similar to the process adopted for September 2020 readiness, the Department will be engaging further with patron bodies shortly in advance of identifying specific September 2021 capacity pressure points priorities which will necessitate specific action.

In a 'normal' year, addressing the increase demands for school places, whilst challenging, is manageable – generally through utilisation of existing spare capacity within schools, rental, temporary accommodation or other short term measures pending the delivery of permanent accommodation.

My Department is concerned to ensure that all pupils in the Greystones school planning area have access to a primary or post-primary school place in September 2021.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

110. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of teachers and school staff who requested an assessment review by a service (details supplied) who have completed a review and have been categorised into a higher risk category. [37375/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has an enhanced Occupational Health Service (OHS) in place to provide employers with occupational health advice in relation to employees' fitness for work. Medmark, the current OHS provider has a process in place for school staff with health concerns about their risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19, through workplace attendance.

A detailed on-line questionnaire is submitted by the employee to Medmark, along with detailed medical evidence to provide clarity with respect to the medical complaint(s) in question. All of this information is reviewed by the OHS specialist occupational health physician, including the combined and cumulative risk that can arise when an employee suffers from more than one health condition. The risk categorisation is comprehensive and follows the same process that is being applied across other sectors. An employee is categorised into one of three COVID-19 risk categories. These are general population risk, higher risk, and very high risk. The outcome of the risk categorisation is governed by the HSE guidance.

Where an employee considers the OHS 'COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report' places him/her in an incorrect risk category, a review can be requested by the employee where Medmark will re-evaluate the medical evidence provided. The employee may provide additional medical evidence as part of the review process.

As at 15 November, a total of 388 reviews have been completed by Medmark. Of these, 54

employees were re-categorised from the High Risk category to the Very High Risk category and 7 employees were re-categorised from the Very High Risk category to the High Risk category.

Due to a recent change to HSE guidelines in relation to persons who are on immunosuppressant therapy, High Risk category employees who believed their Covid-19 risk category may be affected by the guideline change were invited on 6 November to submit a new Covid-19 Health Risk Questionnaire to Medmark. As at 15 November, Medmark has completed a review of 32 newly submitted Health Risk Questionnaires and of these 7 employees were re-categorised to the Very High Risk category.

### **School Funding**

111. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Education if additional funding will be granted to a school (details supplied). [37413/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy is aware capital funding has been approved, for the school in question, to provide essential mainstream classroom accommodation. The project is currently devolved to the school authority.

The immediate priority of my Department is providing 20,000 new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has access to a school place.

Under the National Development Plan (NDP), increased funding has been provided for the school sector capital investment programme. This funding allows for a continued focus on the provision of new permanent school places to keep pace with demographic demand and also provides for an additional focus on the refurbishment of existing school buildings, to include the building and modernisation of PE facilities in post-primary schools.

Under Project Ireland 2040, we will invest €8.4 billion in primary and post primary school buildings. The government is committed to a PE Hall build and modernisation programme, starting in the second half of the Project Ireland 2040 period. The school in question will be considered in this context.

### **Registration of Births**

112. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to delays in newborns being registered and subsequently receiving their PPS number which is causing problems or delays in newborns receiving general practitioner care, vaccinations and other health checks essential for babies to receive proper and timely treatment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37234/20]

121. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current methods of registration of births; if there have been changes to the methods for registration under Covid-19 restrictions; if there are delays in registration of births currently; if so, the average length of the delay; if this is causing delays in newborns being given a PPS number; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37233/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 112 and 121 together.

Parents are able to register births by submitting a Birth Registration Form, by email or post, to a local office of the Civil Registration Service or via the General Register Office (GRO).

The process is relatively straightforward requiring the completion of the information and declarations requested on the form and the provision of photographic identification. In ordinary course, parents are required to appear in person before a registrar to register a birth. The requirement to attend in person before a registrar to register a birth was removed, for the duration of the current emergency, by amendments to the Civil Registration Act 2004 contained in the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020.

I have made enquiries with the GRO which has overall responsibility for the operation of the Civil Registration Service and which operates as part of the Department of Social Protection. They have informed me that, other than in the East Registration Area which covers Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow, that there are no delays in birth registration nationally. The delays being experienced in the East Registration Area relate to the volume of applications received and to the number of incomplete applications which require engagement with the parents. In general, it takes 10 working days to process applications in the East Registration Area.

The GRO has informed me that it is satisfied that there are no significant delays in the registration process once the necessary documentation is in order. To assist parents further, the GRO has recently updated the guidance provided to parents and added a checklist to aid in removing delays that arise due to incomplete applications being made.

A personal public service number (PPSN) is automatically allocated to a new born within 24 hours of the birth registration.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Commission on Pensions**

113. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will include representatives from organisations (details supplied) on the newly established Pensions Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37123/20]

114. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Social Protection if representatives from organisations (details supplied) will be included on the proposed Pensions Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37152/20]

115. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on allowing persons (details supplied) impacted by pension changes to be represented on the Pensions Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37161/20]

117. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if representatives from organisations (details supplied) will be included on the Pensions Commission. [37169/20]

122. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection if organisations (details supplied) will be allowed to be represented on the Pensions Commission for which she is responsible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37289/20]

125. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to calls from an organisation (details supplied) for representation of civic society organisations on the Pensions Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37380/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 113 to 115, inclusive, 117, 122 and 125 together.

I am pleased that the Government approved the establishment of the Commission on Pensions in fulfilment of the Programme for Government commitment.

As the Deputies will be aware, I announced on Budget Day that the planned increase in the State pension age from January of next year will be deferred, in line with our Programme for Government commitment. In this regard, it will remain at 66 years pending the report of the Pensions Commission and I will introduce legislation shortly to give effect to this.

The Commission's Terms of Reference includes the examination of sustainability and eligibility issues with the State Pension and the Social Insurance Fund. More broadly, it will also consider the issue of retirement ages in employment contracts and consider how the pension system can further accommodate carers, who are predominantly women.

The membership of the Commission, approved by Government, reflects the need to have subject matter experts to deal with the complex social and public policy issues arising in pensions, as well as stakeholder representation which will keep the work of the Commission grounded. This includes representation of workers, employers, civil society, academics and those with technical and policy expertise. In this regard, the membership also includes those with involvement in organisations supporting older people.

The Government was keen to ensure that the Commission had strong female membership in its membership, and five of the nine members of the Commission appointed directly by the Government are women. It will be chaired by Ms. Josephine Feehily. I am satisfied that the Commission, with its gender-balanced membership and extensive experience of social and public policy, will be keenly aware of the gender dimension of pensions policy and delivery and will bring this perspective to bear in its work.

The Commission will also engage with a range of key stakeholders to ensure that it has a genuine understanding of not only the fiscal sustainability challenges involved, but also the associated social sustainability challenges of implementing potential policy reforms. The exact mechanisms for this engagement will be shaped by the Chair and by Commission members.

It should be noted that while this Government is acutely conscious of the need to consider the sustainability of the State's finances, this is not the only consideration when thinking of the State pension age. The State Pension is the bedrock of the pension system in Ireland. It is extremely effective at ensuring that our pensioners do not experience poverty. The Government is committed to ensuring that this remains the case.

In line with the Programme for Government, the Commission will report to Government by 30 June of next year and the Government will take action having regard to the recommendations of the Commission within 6 months.

Further details of the Commission's membership and terms of reference are available on the Departmental website at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b1c64-minister-humphreys-announces-the-establishment-of-the-pensions-commission/>

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

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

116. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to awarding the enterprise support grant to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37166/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The COVID-19 Enterprise Support Grant is designed to assist self-employed people who had been in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment or a Jobseeker's Payment and who closed their claim to resume their self-employment since 18 May.

This grant seeks to support micro self-employed enterprises, not currently eligible for similar grant funding through other departments. The support is available to small business owners who employ fewer than 10 people, are not liable for commercial rates and have an annual turnover of less than €1 million.

However as the person concerned was not in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment or a Jobseeker's Payment, he does not meet the qualifying criteria for the grant.

*Question No. 117 answered with Question No. 113.*

### **Brexit Issues**

118. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of her Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37185/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government regrets the UK's decision to leave the EU, although we respect it.

My Department's key policy area is in respect of the impact of Brexit on the reciprocal arrangements for social insurance (which includes pensions) and social assistance (means tested schemes linked to residency rights) and child benefit between Ireland and the UK, including Northern Ireland.

Following the end of the transition period on the 31 December, Irish and British citizens will continue to enjoy the right to travel, live and work between the UK and Ireland in the same manner as before. This is because of a long-standing arrangement known as the Common Travel Area (CTA). The CTA pre-dates Irish and UK membership of the EU and is not dependent on it. Both the Government of Ireland and the Government of the United Kingdom are committed to maintaining the CTA in all circumstances and a Memorandum of Understanding to that effect was signed on the 8 May 2019.

As part of that commitment to the CTA, the Government also entered into a Convention on Social Security with the Government of the United Kingdom, signed on the 1st February 2019. Under the terms of the agreement, Irish and British citizens living in either country will maintain the right to benefit from social insurance contributions made when working in either country and to access social insurance payments, such as state pension (contributory), in either country just as before. The agreement passed through the Parliamentary ratification procedures in both jurisdictions during March 2019, and now stands ready to be given legal effect on the 31 December 2020.

From January 2021, many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally as we will no longer share EU membership. However, the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the end of the transition period. Strong and vibrant connections are vital with our closest neighbour and trading partner. Both Ireland and the UK remain co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and are, as outlined, committed to the ongoing maintenance of the Common Travel Area and its associated rights and privileges.

While we will work with our UK colleagues on strengthening this relationship, it is also clear that Brexit, in any form, will have significant impacts in Ireland. The Department of Finance has projected over the medium-term the level of GDP would be around 2% – 3.25 % lower relative to a hypothetical status quo scenario, with most of the impact in the first year or so.

The Government has been planning for Brexit since before the UK referendum to ensure that Irish citizens and businesses are as ready as possible for all possible scenarios. On 9 September, the Government published its Brexit Readiness Action Plan, which details the actions Government will take and the actions citizens and businesses should take to prepare for the end of the transition period. This work will continue in the weeks ahead.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Personal Public Service Numbers**

119. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) will receive a PPS number. [37222/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that the individual referred to by the Deputy has been contacted regarding his application for a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) by officials of my Department so that they may proceed to progress his application.

Upon receipt of outstanding information, this application will be processed without delay.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Residency Permits**

120. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Social Protection the information her Department has been given from the Department of Justice regarding the requests for up-to-date residence permit cards from migrants in view of the ongoing renewal backlog in Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37227/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Department of Justice has granted a further extension for permissions to reside in the State that were due to expire between 20th September 2020 and 20th January 2021.

The details of this extension were contained in a notice published by that Department on its website on 18 September.

The notice stated that “In light of the uncertainties caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, the following notice applies to all persons with a current valid permission due to expire from 20th September 2020 to 20th January 2021, whether pursuant to domestic law or powers of the Minister, or Directive 2004/38/EC (Free Movement Directive)”;

and that “all such permissions that are due to expire from 20th September 2020 - 20th January 2021 are automatically renewed by the Minister to the 20th January 2021”.

The attention of management and staff of my Department’s Intreo Centres and Local Offices has been drawn to the content of this notice.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 121 answered with Question No. 112.*

*Question No. 122 answered with Question No. 113.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

123. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons already taking part in the community employment scheme will be allowed to continue to finish out their tenure; and if new referrals will be made for the scheme going forward. [37307/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Community Employment (CE) Scheme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

In general, the period of participation on CE is for one year. However, CE participants who are working towards a major award or industry qualification can seek to extend participation by up to a further two years. A significant number of CE participants avail of this extension in order to continue training and obtain qualifications or major awards.

During the initial phase of the Covid-19 emergency earlier this year, when public health restrictions were first introduced, the Department continued to support CE schemes and maintained funding to all schemes. Other contingency measures were also introduced, including the extension of those CE participant contracts that were due to come to an end during the lockdown period.

Following the more recent move to Level-5 restrictions under the Government's Resilience and Recovery Plan, the Department has reintroduced these contingency arrangements for CE schemes and CE participants. The Department will continue to support and provide funding for CE schemes. Department officials have been liaising with schemes to arrange for those CE participants who were due to finish over the 6 week, Level-5 period to have their contracts extended while these restrictions are in place; unless a participant is taking up employment or reaches the State Pension age.

Placements on CE are temporary and are subject to time limits to safeguard the availability of opportunities for employment on CE schemes for other long term unemployed candidates.

Recruitment will continue onto CE schemes during the current Level 5 restrictions where it is appropriate and safe to do so. But level 5 restrictions may have implications for the number of referrals during this period. Once restrictions are reduced or lifted, referrals to CE schemes should begin to get back to more normal levels, with participants being referred by the Departments case offices to CE schemes. Therefore I can assure the Deputy that new referrals will be made to the scheme over the coming period. I am fully committed to the future of this programme and will continue to support and improve the programme for the benefit of the CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities.

### **Personal Public Service Numbers**

124. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection the measures she

will implement to reduce substantially the delays in processing and finalising applications for personal public service numbers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37333/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The SAFE registration process, which involves the authentication of a person's identity in a face-to-face interview, is the normal method of processing an application for a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN).

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, my Department temporarily suspended the SAFE registration process. This decision was taken in order to comply with HSE and World Health Organisation guidelines in respect of social distancing.

To help ensure that those who required a PPSN could get one, my Department introduced an email and postal service through which applications could be made.

My Department has received, and continues to receive, significant volumes of email and post in relation to PPSN applications from people living in and outside the State.

It is inevitably the case that a temporary process such as this will not be as efficient as the face-to-face process it has temporarily replaced, neither for applicants nor for the staff dealing with those applications.

Additional resources have been reassigned to deal with email and postal PPSN applications. I expect this will result in improved processing times and a reduction in the number of applications on hand.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 125 answered with Question No. 113.*

### **Partial Capacity Benefit Scheme**

126. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for a partial capacity benefit by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37394/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Partial Capacity Benefit allows a person who has been in receipt of Illness Benefit for six months or Invalidity Pension and who may not have full capacity for work, to return to employment and continue to receive a full or partial payment from the Department.

The rate of payment is based on the assessment of the person's restriction on capacity for work; either moderate, severe or profound and the person retains 50%, 75%, or 100% of their Illness Benefit payment respectively.

The Partial Capacity Benefit claim from the person concerned has been processed. A letter will issue shortly informing him that he has been assessed as having a moderate restriction on his capacity for work.

There may be an over issue of payment to be dealt with by the Invalidity Pension section of the Department due to payment being issued on that scheme after the return to work date of 14/09/2020. The customer will be contacted directly by Invalidity Pension section regarding this matter.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## Foster Care

127. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if paid leave entitlements are in place for persons who become foster parents while employed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37148/20]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** There is, at present, no leave entitlement available for persons undergoing a social work fostering assessment, or for approved foster carers.

## Brexit Issues

128. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37172/20]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The direct impact of Brexit on my Department, and the agencies under its remit, is limited. My Department continues to actively engage with the cross Departmental Brexit co-ordination structures, chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs. We will continue to work closely with colleagues across Government to protect the rights of children and to address other challenges resulting from Brexit.

## Childcare Costs

129. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the problems being experienced by parents on the wage subsidy scheme who continue to pay childcare costs through various schemes (details supplied); if allowances are being made for such cases; if he will review this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37228/20]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The NCS offers a flexible application process, with a variety of assessment options for parents to assess their most recent income circumstances. One of these is a Current Year Assessment. This allows parents to have their current year’s income assessed to determine their level of subsidy, rather than the default option of the previous tax year. This could more accurately reflect their current income level.

In addition, the ‘Sudden Change Assessment’ option allows for applicants to declare that they have had an ongoing change to their income. This applies to people who have lost a job or their income has reduced on an ongoing basis for reasons outside of their control. This measure will be of benefit to many parents who have had their income impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and may be of assistance to the parent in question. Parents will need to complete a new NCS application to avail of this measure.

A range of supports have been provided to support the ELC and SAC sector through this difficult year. A package of supports worth nearly €300m was introduced in July to assist the sector to reopen, recognising the importance of the sector for children’s positive development and in terms of supporting the economy to return to normal.

Amongst these is the COVID-19 Sustainability Support Fund 2020 is available to support

the sustainability of Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) services whose viability is still negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The grant provides funding to successful applicants to offset losses caused by a decrease in occupancy and/or an increase in costs due to the pandemic. Applications for the first round of funding closed on 20 October, but additional rounds are planned and the dates will be announced soon.

Childcare providers are responsible for their own sessions, fees and admissions policies. However, the funding package and supports outlined above were put in place to support the sustainability of childcare providers throughout the pandemic, and to provide them with the opportunity to be as flexible as possible in supporting the families using their services.

Further information and resources for parents are available by contacting The Parent Support Centre on 01 906 8530 or by visiting [www.ncs.gov.ie](http://www.ncs.gov.ie). I have also asked the local County Childcare Committee to make contact with the parent to assist in their engagement with childcare provider.

### **Childcare Costs**

130. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to concerns raised by community childcare providers on foot of a circular letter (details supplied); if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that many parents are struggling to pay the normal fee with the subsidy without having to pay the additional due to a child being unable to attend due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37264/20]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The communication to which the Deputy refers is a system notification that issues to parents and childcare providers where a child has under-attended their National Childcare Scheme registered hours for eight consecutive weeks.

It is a key aspect of the NCS that all claims are paid in arrears based on the attendance of a child and as agreed between the parent and provider. As such, the child must be registered with a childcare provider and the provider must confirm that attendance. This is a key financial and governance control to ensure we are maximising the benefits of public monies and that the investment is following the child.

In setting this requirements, my Department has provided broad rules which reflect the realities of family life. These rules are intended to be child-centred, fair and proportionate, clear and consistent and recognise the need for flexibility for parents. They will not disadvantage parents or services for what would be considered minor non-attendances.

Where a child is attending their childcare service for fewer than their registered NCS hours, a notification issues to the parent and childcare provider after eight weeks of under-attendance, informing them that unless the child begins to attend for their full registered hours, the number of subsidised hours will be reduced to reflect actual usage by the child. It is very important to note that this adjustment will not be implemented until a child has under-attended their registered NCS hours for 12 consecutive weeks.

It is then a matter for the childcare provider to agree what the fee will be based on the existing or new attendance arrangements. This includes any charge to the parent should choose not attend for an extended period. My Department does not set the level of copayment between the

parent and the provider.

With regard to the viability of childcare facilities, my Department has increased Early Years funding by an unprecedented 141% since 2015. A significant proportion of this funding has been targeted at families who use community childcare services, thus assisting with the sustainability faced by some services.

For any services facing issues with financial sustainability, my Department oversees the Case Management system administered by Pobal. This service provides non-financial assistance or support in the first instance, but financial supports are also available for services facing certain challenges, following an assessment. I would encourage any childcare providers facing sustainability issues to contact their local Childcare Committee or Pobal with any concerns regarding the sustainability of their service.

### Children in Care

131. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the total number of children in care; the total number in short-term and long-term care, respectively; if he will provide a summary of the postal districts they are from originally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37301/20]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that Tusla respond directly to the Deputy.

### Education and Training Boards

132. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will address a matter in relation to KETB (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37240/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** I understand from Kerry Education and Training Board (Kerry ETB) that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, staff were assigned to one school or centre where possible to minimise their number of contacts. I am advised by Kerry ETB that in this process there was no deviation from, or amendment to, agreed staffing terms and conditions.

### Brexit Issues

133. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37179/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Brexit will bring change in terms of managing relationships between education systems, North and South, and East West. While many of the potential negative impacts of Brexit in terms of education have been mitigated through the Memorandum of Understanding

on the Common Travel Area, my Department's focus has been on protecting and strengthening the collaboration between our education systems.

I also see opportunities for us in the area of international education, given that we will be the only native English-speaking country in the EU. While Ireland is already an attractive place for international students and for institutional collaboration and research collaboration, I will be bringing forward new Strategic Plans in these areas that will seek to maximise opportunities in higher education and research in the post-Brexit era, including those offered by our continuing membership of the EU.

### Apprenticeship Programmes

134. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprentices employed by each local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37189/20]

135. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprentices employed by each State and semi-State body; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37190/20]

136. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprentices employed in each university, technological university and institute of technology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37216/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 134 to 136, inclusive, together.

There are a total of 58 apprenticeship programmes available to employers at the current time, with a further 20 apprenticeships in development. Engagement by an employer in an apprenticeship programme is dependent on meeting an identified skills development need within that organisation. The steps for employers to become engaged in an existing programme, or to initiate the development of a new apprenticeship, are set out on [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie).

The Government has committed to the delivery of a new Action Plan for Apprenticeship by the end of the year. The Action Plan will set out measures to widen employer engagement with apprenticeship in both the public and private sectors with the target of reaching 10,000 new apprentice registrations per annum by 2025

There are over 6,000 employers with 18,800 registered apprentices as of October 2020, however the apprentice register does not hold a tag for state and semi-state employers. A review of the information within the register is being undertaken and the information will be forwarded to the Deputy once available.

The numbers of registered apprentices employed by local authorities and in higher education institutions are set out in the attached table.

Apprentices employed in each university, technological university and institute of technology

Employer	Total
Athlone Institute Of Technology	3

Employer	Total
University College Dublin (UCD)	1

#### Apprentices employed by each local authority

Employer	Total
Clare County Council	2
Cork City Council	1
Cork County Council	6
Donegal Co Council	1
Dublin City Council	26
Fingal County Council	2
Limerick City & County Council	2
Tipperary County Council	2
Westmeath Co Council	3
Wexford County Council	1
Wicklow County Council	3

### Third Level Fees

137. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if funding supports for graduate entry medicine students are to remain in its current form; if he will change the current system of charging students €16,000 per annum; if he will consider altering the current and only option for student loans for these courses by arrangement with a bank (details supplied) and accept that during a global pandemic the need for qualified medical personnel needs his attention to make the graduate course more accessible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37267/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** As the Deputy will be aware, the fee payable by a student can vary depending on a variety of factors including the type of course and the student's access route including previous education.

Under the Department's Free Fees Initiative, the Exchequer pays tuition fees on behalf of eligible first time undergraduate students attending approved full-time undergraduate courses (including medicine courses). In order to qualify for funding under the Department's Free Fees Initiative, students must meet the criteria of the scheme including previous education attainment.

Graduate Entry Medicine (GEM) is one of the pathways to study undergraduate medicine. Students pursuing GEM programmes do so as second degree courses and consequently are not eligible for free fees funding or for student grants. However, in order to widen access to GEM programmes, and give assistance towards the financial burden on each student pursuing these programmes, the fees of participating EU students are partly subsidised by the State via the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Currently, the subsidy is €11,200 per student with the balance of fees payable by the student.

There is no Department supported loan scheme in place for GEM students. As you are aware there are private loans available for GEM students but these are arrangements between the relevant lenders and the students applying for such loans and the Department has no role in such arrangements.

Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own

day-to-day management and operational affairs, including the management of academic affairs. They retain the right to determine their own policies and procedures. The level of fees to be charged in the case of GEM fees are therefore solely a matter for the relevant institution to determine in line with its own criteria.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

138. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the drop-out rate of apprenticeships over the past ten years; the breakdown between craft apprentices and new apprenticeships for as many years as are available in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37332/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** Apprentices are primarily employees. Where apprentices are made redundant then supports are in place through the Authorised Officers within the Education and Training Boards to seek an alternative approved employer to allow apprentices to continue their apprenticeship.

The apprentice register does not hold an indicator for apprentices who have failed to complete their programme of study. A review of the register is underway to identify the rate of non-completion of apprenticeships within a specified time period. The information will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as it becomes available.

### **Third Level Staff**

139. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 238 of 1 October 2020, his views on whether the requirement by the National University of Ireland Galway for PhD students to make contributions of on average five hours per week over 24 weeks over three academic years without extra payment, breaches the requirement of the same postgraduates to sign a declaration to the Revenue Commissioners that there would be no element of service directly or indirectly between the sponsor and the scholarship recipient or between the colleges university and the scholarship recipient. [37364/20]

140. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on whether requiring unpaid postgraduate workers to carry out in-person teaching at NUI Galway such as lab demonstrations which cannot be done online during a global pandemic should be regarded as an integral part of the training of a research masters or PhD student. [37365/20]

141. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 238 of 1 October 2020, his views on whether NUI Galway is complying with the obligation of employers and or funders under the European Researchers Charter to ensure that teaching duties are adequately remunerated given the requirement of the university of PhD students to make contributions of on average five hours per week over 24 weeks over three academic years without extra payment. [37366/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 139 to 141, inclusive, together.

Postgraduate programmes are comprised of a range of elements designed to further the

training and development of students, including the development of generic and transferable skills. These activities are regarded as an integral part of the training, and typically include a range of activities under the teaching contribution. PhD students may contribute to teaching, often at a level of 120-150 hours per year over the course of their studies, without extra payment. Such duties, which are commonly part of their terms and constitute an element in an upskilling programme, should not be viewed as unpaid teaching.

In relation to the allocation of teaching contribution during Covid-19 pandemic, I understand that no research supervisor or line manager will compel a research student to undertake an on-campus teaching contribution, and if a research student is not in a position to undertake an on-campus teaching contribution, they may be allocated alternate forms of teaching contribution.

The main purpose of the teaching contribution is teaching practice and development for the promotion of education, and is not for the purposes of fulfilling employment services. As such, I understand that this is permissible within Revenue rules.

While contributing to teaching is an integral part of the training of a research Master's or PhD student, the core component of research programmes across all higher education institutions is the advancement of knowledge through original research, which must remain the primary focus of the activity of research students.

The delivery of teaching duties by graduate students in a higher education institution is a matter for the institution concerned reflecting their independent self-governed status. It is important that the allocation and conduct of such work is undertaken in accordance with the objectives of the National Framework for Doctoral Education and the PhD Graduate Skills Statement in enabling the development of key skills and competencies for postgraduate students.

In circumstances where issues arise relating to teaching duties of postgraduate students in terms of the Framework and Skills Statement, all parties should engage constructively in the interest of securing balanced solutions.

### **Third Level Staff**

142. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if higher educational institutions should comply with the Irish Research Council Government-funded scholarship guideline that where scholars undertake such teaching or demonstration duties as listed that they should be appropriately remunerated by their HEI; if not, if this is optional; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37367/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The aim of the Irish Research Council's Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarships Scheme (GOIPG) is to support suitably qualified research master's and doctoral candidates pursuing, or intending to pursue, full-time research in any discipline. The Terms and Conditions of the Scheme stipulates that award holders must engage full-time in research during the funding term and should not engage in any activity other than developing the stated research project and the Training and Career Development Plan.?

However, the Irish Research Council recognises that teaching is an essential means for the structuring and dissemination of knowledge and should, therefore, be considered a valuable activity within the award holders' career. In exceptional circumstances, an award holder may engage in other work as an alternative to tutorial or demonstration work. The Council therefore allows award holders to agree to take on additional work (e.g. teaching duties, mentorship and

support activities) during the award, provided the award holder submits a written statement of support from their academic mentor/supervisor and obtains prior written permission from the Council before the teaching term begins or at the beginning of the term.

The work cannot be excessive and must not exceed a total of 150 hours per academic year, including contact and non-contact hours. The work must not prevent researchers from carrying out their research activities and should be relevant to the research funded by the award and consistent with the Training and Career Development Plan agreed by the award holder and academic mentor/supervisor.

Where scholars funded by a GOIPG award undertake such teaching or other duties as listed above, they should be appropriately remunerated by their Irish HEI/RPO. Any such payments will not affect the awardee's total amount of award. Compliance with Irish laws and regulations on taxation will be a matter for the awardee, the Irish HEI/RPO and the Office of the Revenue Commissioners. Contractual and remuneration matters in respect of additional duties are a matter for agreement between the scholar and the HEI.

Host organisations must keep and hold records and approvals of additional or other work by award holders and should ensure that such work is taken into account in relevant evaluation/appraisal systems and contributes to the professional development of the award holder. Suitable training should be provided for teaching activities as part of the professional development of award holders.

### **Third Level Education**

143. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans for an audit of the various different virtual teaching and learning taking place in third level institutions to ensure shared learning of success and a standard of practice. [37378/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** As part of the wider response to Covid-19 across the further and higher education and training sectors, there has been an extensive focus on the implementation of alternative methods of Teaching, Learning and Assessment necessitated by the restrictions implemented by Government to protect public health and to combat the spread of the pandemic. My Department and its agencies have been working closely with sectoral stakeholders to support these efforts and to ensure that quality, integrity and standards continue to be maintained across the system.

Following the conclusion of the academic term 2019/2020, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) undertook a comprehensive evaluation of the response of higher and further education and training institutions to the COVID-19 crisis. In August 2020, QQI published a report based on this work entitled "The Impact of COVID-19 modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education - A QQI Evaluation" which is available online at <https://www.qqi.ie/News/Pages/Irish-Further-and-Higher-Education-and-Training-Sectors-step-up-during-Lockdown.aspx>. This Report details the measures taken by universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards, private higher education institutions during the initial stages of the pandemic when campuses and premises were required to close - highlighting both good practice nationally and emerging international developments.

High-level findings from the report state that:

- In the circumstances, teaching in the second semester of 2019-20 seems to have gone reasonably well in that programmes have generally not been delayed or completely derailed. Exceptions include some professional body placements, apprenticeships and research which were all adversely affected by COVID-19 disruptions.

- Tertiary education staff clearly met the challenge presented by moving online. There was considerable behind-the-scenes coherence and joined-up thinking in evidence across the tertiary system, both within and between institutions.

- Ireland performed well in comparison to other more dispersed education and training systems internationally such as the US. There was also recognition from Australia in relation to Ireland's superior level of supports and resources made available to international students during the pandemic.

- The response of tertiary education institutions to the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the complicated nature of their operating environment. Institutions used existing management and Quality Assurance infrastructure to successfully govern change management. This proved crucial to flexible and agile responses, inspiring confidence in the changes implemented.

- Many students were positive and appreciative of the efforts made by their institutions. More than half of HE students responding to a USI survey expressed satisfaction with the quality of their remote teaching and learning. The majority of FE learners also felt confident in their ability to complete assessments and felt they were fair.

- The regulatory flexibility within the tertiary system enabled people to learn, innovate, solve problems and get things done, and the strength of the sector's communities of practice helped to support standards.

- Despite many students expressing satisfaction with the COVID-19 response, a number were dissatisfied with various aspects of how things were handled. Responses from practitioners suggested that some marginalised and vulnerable groups were particularly disadvantaged by the experience of remote teaching and learning. It is important to understand what can be done to enhance the response for 20/21.

The findings of this report have been used by Further and Higher Education Institutions to inform, modify and refine their approaches to Teaching, Learning and Assessment for the current academic term. A range of further resources which have also been made available to Institutions to support these efforts including but not limited to:

- Teaching resources highlighting best practice published by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL)

- Guiding principles for alternative assessments (devised in response to the COVID-19 emergency restrictions) published by QQI.

- QQI's Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended Learning in an online context.

- Interim national guidelines on Academic Integrity developed by the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN).

The alternative methods of Teaching, Learning and Assessment that have been implemented will continue to be subject to each Institution's internal quality assurance procedures with relevant external oversight. A follow up to QQI's wider evaluation of both these sectors will be considered in 2021 once an appropriate interval has passed.

### Third Level Fees

144. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the supports available for a student who wants to pursue a masters and cannot secure a student grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37412/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The main support available to assist postgraduate students with the cost of attending higher education is the Student Grant Scheme and the Programme for Government committed to addressing the gap in postgraduate grants.

From September 2021 the postgraduate fee grant will increase to €3,500 from €2,000. This increase will allay some of the costs for postgraduate study and would give greater certainty for students in terms of supports. In addition, the fee income threshold will increase to €54,240 from €31,500 from September 2021.

Further information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website: [www.susi.ie](http://www.susi.ie). The telephone number for SUSI's Helpdesk is 0761 087 874.

Also, in the context of a person re-educating, Springboard is a specific initiative that strategically targets funding of free part-time higher education courses to enable unemployed people to upskill or reskill in areas where there are identified labour market skills shortages or employment opportunities. The courses, which are at Level 6 (Higher Certificate) to Level 9 (Master's Degree) on the National Framework of Qualifications, are being delivered in public and private higher education institutions around the country. Further information may be obtained from the website <https://springboardcourses.ie/>

The student may also wish to contact the institution they are proposing to attend directly to make enquiries as to whether any bursaries or student support funds operated by the college may be available.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware of the recently announced €168m funding package for the return to education. This package includes a €10m access support package for higher education students. I have approved the allocation of €8.1m of this funding to top up the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). The SAF assists students in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended.

The €168m funding package also includes €15m in IT equipment grants for disadvantaged students in further and higher education and a €10m access support package for higher education students. An additional €3m has also been provided for investment in supports for mental health services and well-being initiatives.

Tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax office or from the Revenue Commissioners website [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie)

### Road Traffic Offences

145. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of registered vehicle owners penalised per year for allowing their vehicle to be driven by an unaccompanied learner driver under the Clancy Amendment since the amendment came into effect on 22 December 2018; the fines imposed per year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37146/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2018, known as the Clancy Amendment, seeks to penalise car owners who knowingly allow their vehicles to be used by an unaccompanied learner driver. The law allows the owners of these vehicles to be fined and gives Gardaí the power to seize their cars if being driven by unaccompanied drivers.

The below table has been furnished to me by the Garda authorities and shows the number of incidents where a vehicle was seized under the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act:

Year	
2019	2513
2020*	2701

\*Up to 31 October 2020

I am further informed that Fixed Charge Notices (FCN) are also issued for learner drivers unaccompanied by a qualified driver. The number of FCN's issued to learner drivers unaccompanied by a qualified driver are outlined in the table below.

Year	FCNs issued
2019	6145
2020*	5367

\*Up to 31 October 2020

All information contained in the tables above are based upon operational data from the PULSE and FCPS systems as was available on 16 November 2020 and is liable to change.

### Garda Powers

146. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice if a disaggregation of the use of each of the five new powers afforded to An Garda Síochána under section 31(A) of the Health Act, 1947 (as amended) to date will be provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37163/20]

147. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the Policing Authority in each of its reports on policing performance by An Garda Síochána during Covid-19 to date has highlighted the failure by the force to provide a disaggregation of the use of each of the five new powers afforded to An Garda Síochána under section 31(A) of the Health Act, 1947 (as amended); the steps she is taking in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37164/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 146 and 147 together.

As the Deputy will be aware my predecessor, Minister Flanagan, requested that the Policing Authority provide regular reports on the use of emergency legislation by An Garda Síochána during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. To date the Authority has provided nine such

reports on a monthly basis.

The Authority have been very thorough in their interaction with Garda management and with outreach to communities and stakeholders throughout Ireland. Their overall findings across the reports are very welcome and show that the level of use of the temporary public health powers has been modest, given the extensive level of engagement between An Garda Síochána and the public.

The Authority has also noted the positive reaction at community level to the breadth and depth of engagement by Gardaí. Those who work with vulnerable people have reported very positive responses from Gardaí throughout the country. The Policing Authority have stressed the positive tone of policing and community engagement carried out by An Garda Síochána and reported to them by various community groups.

The Deputy may wish to note that the issue of the disaggregation of information was discussed at the most recent meeting held between the Garda Commissioner and the Policing Authority on 30th September. At that meeting, the Commissioner gave a commitment to examine the issue. I understand that the next public meeting is due to be held at the end of this month.

### **Brexit Issues**

148. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Justice her views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of her Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37182/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Ireland regrets the UK's decision to leave the EU, although we respect it.

From 1 January 2021, many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally as we will no longer share EU membership. However, the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship following the end of the transition period. Strong and vibrant connections are vital with our closest neighbour and trading partner. Both Ireland and the UK remain co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and are committed to the ongoing maintenance of the Common Travel Area and its associated rights and privileges.

The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Johnson at their meeting in Belfast on 13 August 2020 have already discussed the importance of nurturing and developing the bilateral relationship in a structured way in the context where the UK has left the EU.

While we will work with our UK colleagues on strengthening this relationship, it is also clear that Brexit, in any form, will have significant impacts in Ireland. The Department of Finance has projected over the medium-term the level of GDP would be around 2% – 3.25 % lower relative to a hypothetical status quo scenario, with most of the impact in the first year or so.

In so far as the justice sector is concerned, it is clearly important that we maintain the closest possible cooperation in the field of criminal justice, and that there are efficient mechanisms to deal with cross-border civil and family law matters. We do not envisage any diminution in the joint commitment to security and police operational cooperation between the UK and Ireland. Our respective agencies work closely together and that will continue.

The Government has been planning for Brexit since before the UK referendum to ensure

that Irish citizens and businesses are as ready as possible for all possible scenarios. On 9 September, the Government published its Brexit Readiness Action Plan, which details the actions Government will take and the actions citizens and businesses should take to prepare for the end of the transition period. This work will continue in the weeks ahead.

### **Visa Applications**

149. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the reason visa applications in the case of persons (details supplied) have been refused; the procedure to be followed to appeal same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37199/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The visa applications referred to by the Deputy were refused by the Visa Office in Abuja on 2 November 2020. The reasons for this decision were set out in the refusal letter sent to the applicants at that time.

The refusal letter also sets out whether or not the applicants are allowed to appeal. Where an appeal is allowed, there is no fee for such an appeal. An appeal must arrive with the Visa Office within two months of the date on the letter of refusal. If the appeal is late, the original visa decision cannot be changed. However, the applicants may make a new visa application if they wish. I am advised that, to date, no appeal applications have been received in respect of these applications.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility, which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Garda Training**

150. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 174 of 24 September 2020, if the 323 members that have already been given access to the FCN app completed the training to date and if not, the date on which it is planned that online training can take place for the other 407 members. [37203/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will appreciate that the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling generally the administration and business of An Garda Síochána, and I, as Minister, have no direct role in the matter.

I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but it was unfortunately not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

### **Departmental Meetings**

151. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide a schedule of the engagements she and her predecessor have had with the Israeli Ministry of Public Security; and if she will provide details of the nature of the engagements and her plans to meet

and or engage with the Israeli Ministry of Public Security. [37213/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have consulted with officials in my Department and can confirm that neither I, nor my predecessor Minister Flanagan during his tenure in office in this Department, have had any meetings with representatives of the Israeli Ministry of Public Security.

Further, I can confirm that I have no plans to meet with any representatives of the Israeli Ministry of Public Security at present.

### **Garda Operations**

152. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she has been briefed by the Garda Commissioner regarding the EU funded research project called ROXANNE, also known as Real time network, text, and speaker analytics for combating organised crime. [37214/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. As Minister, I have no role in these independent functions.

An Garda Síochána are responsive to the changing nature of crime, responding to evolving threats, increasing their capabilities and knowledge and working with partner agencies/police services to ensure organised crime and criminals do not impact on our society and people.

I have been briefed by the Commissioner on Project ROXANNE which is an EU-funded project targeting criminal networks. The project is a collaboration between law enforcement, industry and academia to develop new tools to support investigations. I understand the project is funded through the EU's Horizon 2020 initiative and is made up of 24 members from the private and public sectors. As with all EU projects, participants and partners must adhere to the highest ethical and research integrity principles. As the Deputy will appreciate, the objective is to strengthen/enhance capacity to combat international and transnational serious and organised crime, in addition to combating threats against the security of the State.

### **Naturalisation Applications**

153. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); when the application will be concluded; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37220/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** An application for a Certificate of Naturalisation has been received from the person concerned and will be processed with a view to establishing whether the person meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation. Foremost among those conditions is that the person will have accumulated 60 months of reckonable residence in the State.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their

application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time. In that context, it is important that an applicant ensures that his or her contact details, including their up to date address, is notified to the Citizenship Division of my Department's Immigration Service.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Garda National Immigration Bureau**

154. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Justice the number of registrations Henry Street Garda National Immigration Bureau office in Limerick city is processing each week; the wait time for appointments; the current backlog in registrations for the Limerick office; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37226/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** My Department registers persons residing in the Dublin area only. The Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) processes all applications outside of Dublin through the Garda Station network. However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have made enquiries with the Commissioner and have received the following update.

The Henry Street Immigration Office is processing circa 375 - 400 registrations per 7 day week and the wait time for appointments is approximately 6 - 7 weeks. The backlog in registrations is estimated to be between 700 to 800.

Every effort is being made to address the backlog of registrants and a number of measures have been introduced to reduce the waiting time. The capacity of the Henry Street Immigration Office to process applicants has recently been increased with the addition of a third customer hatch. The opening hours have been extended with the Immigration Office now open for appointments from 7.30am straight through to 10.30pm.

### **Gambling Sector**

155. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department will be bringing forward legislation to regulate the area of online gambling and gambling advertising given the lack of regulation combined with scale and nature of problem gambling which has been extenuated during the public health lockdowns. [37242/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The Programme for Government gives a clear commitment to establish a gambling regulator focused on public safety and well-being, covering gambling online and in person, and the powers to regulate advertising, gambling websites and apps.

Work is currently underway in my department on the development of the legislation to provide for the necessary modern licensing and regulatory provisions for the Irish gambling industry. I hope to bring proposals in that regard to Government next year.

Given the size, complexity and technological development of the modern gambling industry and having regard to the current outdated and complex arrangements, it will be important that the regulator will be established on a strong footing and adequately resourced to carry out this important task.

### **Visa Applications**

156. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline for an application for a visa by a person (details supplied) whose partner is an Irish national; when a decision will be made on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37268/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Based on the details provided by the Deputy, there is no record of an application, or a request, from the person concerned for permission to remain in the State since their last permission expired on 12 May 2019. If more information can be provided, my officials will be happy to re-examine the Deputy's request.

The person concerned is advised to write to the Immigration Service of my Department and request to regularise their position in the State. When submitting their request, they should outline their current circumstances, the date of their arrival in the State. They should also enclose a copy of their passport, along with any documentation that they believe will support their case. The application should be submitted, via registered post, to Residence Division - Unit 2, Immigration Service, 13/14 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2, D02 XK70.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **International Protection**

157. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice further to her public statement of the 21 October 2020 (details supplied), if she will confirm the changes are now in place; if she intends to bring forward new regulations in order to give effect to the changes announced; if so, when it expected that such regulations will be in place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37280/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, transposing the EU (Recast) Reception Conditions Directive, came into effect from 30 June 2018. The Regulations include a provision on access to the labour market for eligible international protection applicants. Currently, any applicant who has not received a first instance decision within 9 months can make an application for a labour market access permission.

Following a review of Access to the Labour Market for Persons Seeking International Protection, led by my Department, and approval of the recommendations by Government, I announced on 21 October 2020, that a number of positive changes are being introduced. The waiting period for applying for a labour market permission is being reduced from 9 months to 6 months and the validity of the permission is being extended from 6 months to 12 months. I

also announced that we will expand the access to the labour market to include those applicants who received a first instance recommendation before the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018 came into force, provided that they meet the criteria set out in the Regulations. The restriction preventing people accessing employment with public health employers, subject to them having the necessary qualifications, is also being removed.

These changes will need to be facilitated by an amending Statutory Instrument to the 2018 Regulations, which it is hoped to progress as soon as possible.

### **Citizenship Applications**

158. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied); when correspondence will be issued to confirm receipt of the application; when the active passports will be returned to the applicant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37284/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Citizenship Division of the Immigration Service of my Department is working very hard to maintain as prompt a service as possible during the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Unfortunately, as a result of these restrictions, significant delays are occurring in the issuing of acknowledgment receipts and the processing and return of documentation.

If the person concerned sends their An Post tracking number that they received when posting their application to citizenshipinfo@justice.ie, the Citizenship Division will check the record and confirm if the application has been received.

The ability of staff to attend at the office continues to be impacted and the verification of passports cannot be performed remotely for data protection reasons. However, if the person concerned urgently requires their passport for emergency reasons such as medical reasons, they should email the Citizenship Division setting out the reasons and provide colour scanned copies of supporting documentation such as a letter from their medical consultant.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Garda Deployment**

159. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí allocated to each Garda station in the DMR by rank; the number in the community Garda service in each station in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37292/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

The resources provided by Government to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented

levels, with an allocation of €1.88 billion for 2020 and of €1.952 billion in Budget 2021. This level of investment is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. There are now approximately 14,600 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff. Taken together, this number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the total number of Gardaí stationed in the DMR as of 31 October 2020 is 3,924.

Table 1 attached shows the Garda Strength by grade in the DMR by division, district and station.

With regard to the number in the community Garda service in each station, I am advised by the Commissioner that not all of the information requested is readily available in the format requested, as Community Gardaí are assigned on a Garda Divisional basis.

I am however informed that the table below shows the number of Community Gardaí by division as at 30 September 2020, the latest date for which figures are available.

DIVISION	Sept 2020
D.M.R. EAST	21
D.M.R. NORTH	17
D.M.R. NORTH CENTRAL	54
D.M.R. SOUTH	50
D.M.R. SOUTH CENTRAL	56
D.M.R. WEST	76
TOTAL	274

The Deputy may wish to know that detailed information in relation to Garda numbers is available on my Department's website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána, at the following link:

[http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_August\\_2020.xlsx/Files/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_August\\_2020.xlsx](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx)

Figures for Community Policing by Division can be found on my Department's website at the following link:

[http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Community\\_Policing](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Community_Policing)

Additional information on Garda staff, the Garda Workforce and other relevant statistics are available at the following link:

[http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An\\_Garda\\_Siochana\\_facts\\_and\\_figures](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures).

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-11-18\_pq159-18-11-2020\_en.xlsx">DMR Strength</a>]

## Crime Data

160. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice the number of stolen bikes seized by An Garda Síochána in 2019 and to date in 2020; the number that were returned to owners by An Garda Síochána in the same period; and if she will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [37295/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will appreciate that the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling generally the administration and business of An Garda Síochána, and I, as Minister, have no direct role in the matter.

I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but it was unfortunately not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

### **Departmental Reports**

161. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice if a copy of the report will be provided which it is understood issued in February 2019 from a cross-agency meeting, comprising the Department of Transport, An Garda Síochána and the Office of the Attorney General and which aimed to identify specific solutions to deal with the misuse of scramblers and quad bikes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37297/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** My Department, alongside colleagues in the Department of Transport and An Garda Síochána, is acutely aware of the severe difficulties and dangers the misuse of scramblers and quad bikes causes in the communities it impacts and my officials have been working to find solutions to this complex issue.

Insofar as your reference to a report issued by the cross-agency grouping is concerned, the then Minister referenced a report in the House on 13 February 2019. This reference was to the legal advice sought from the Attorney General in the aftermath of the initial meeting of this grouping which was received the prior November. As you will appreciate, legal advices received from the Attorney General are not generally published.

The cross-agency group most recently met in September 2020. The group agreed that the Department of Transport - which has primary responsibility for road traffic legislation – would explore the feasibility of developing new legislative provisions in road traffic legislation, following on from the suggestions of An Garda Síochána, without causing unintended consequences for existing law.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to “enhance powers available to An Garda Síochána to limit the use of scramblers and quads by those engaged in anti-social behaviour and enact legislation to add to those powers if needed.”

It was also agreed at the September meeting that my Department would consider and develop actions in order to increase awareness of the dangers of these vehicles jointly with affected communities, community groups and other stakeholders, and explore how best to engage with young persons who are drawn to this behaviour. My Department is examining options in this area, with due regard to social distancing requirements.

### **Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service**

162. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the INIS registration offices in Dublin and regionally are currently closed for first-time registration (details supplied); the reason immigration registration offices are closed and are not deemed to be an essential public service; and if she will make a statement on the

matter. [37327/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** On 18 September 2020, I announced that all immigration and international protection permissions to reside in the State that were due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021 were automatically renewed to the 20 January 2021. The renewal of a permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach. This has ensured that people do not fall out of permission and remain legally resident in the State during this time.

The Registration Office in Burgh Quay closed to the public on 22 October 2020 following the introduction of Level 5 restrictions under the Government's Framework for Living with Covid-19. The decision was taken in line with public health guidelines, for the safety of our customers and staff. First-time registrations require the taking of fingerprints and therefore cannot be done online. The Office will reopen as soon as Level 5 restrictions are lifted and appointments will be available to people living in the Dublin area who are required to register for the first time.

Registrations outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) through the Garda Station network. Further information, and the contact details of each registration office outside Dublin, is available from <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html>.

### Veterinary Inspection Service

163. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the reason small abattoirs are required to have veterinary inspectors present during operation; when this was introduced; the reason it is necessary; the differences made for small independent producers and the large meat processors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37196/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** All slaughterhouses are required to have official veterinarians present to examine animals before slaughter (ante-mortem) to ensure they are fit for slaughter for human consumption and that animal health and welfare legislation is complied with, including requirements for traceability. Slaughterhouses are also required to have official veterinarians present to examine the carcasses of slaughtered animals post-mortem to check for evidence of disease and traces of illegal substances, to verify compliance with hygiene requirements and to stamp the carcasses with a health mark to verify that they are suitable for human consumption. These checks are fundamental to maintaining the safety of the supply of meat and to protect public health. Policy concerning animal health and welfare rests with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

Meat inspection by official veterinarians has been legislated for at European level since 1964 (Directive 64/432/EEC) and in Ireland for the smaller slaughterhouses since 1988 (Abattoirs Act 1988). The current legal framework for meat inspection is Regulation (EU) 2017/625 and implementing legislation (Regulations (EU) 2019/624 and 2019/627), as given effect to by the European Union (Food and Food Hygiene) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 22 of 2020).

In Ireland, large slaughterhouses are supervised by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and smaller ones by the Local Authorities – in each case the official food controls take place under a service contract between the respective official agency and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland.

The Regulations governing hygiene requirements in slaughterhouses, for which DAFM has

policy responsibility, apply to large and small slaughterhouses, though there is scope for some flexibility for small producers in Regulation (EU) 853/2004 on the hygiene of foods of animal origin provided that the appropriate high standards of hygiene are achieved. In line with this flexibility, the smaller local authority-supervised slaughterhouses tend not to have a permanent veterinary attendance during slaughter, whereas the larger DAFM-supervised slaughterhouses tend to have a permanent veterinary presence.

### **Mental Health Services**

164. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health when a full recommencement of services at the community mental health centre in Mullingar, County Westmeath will take place; when all staff will be re-deployed to their original positions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37122/20]

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

### **Medicinal Products**

165. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE management team is expected to make a final decision on the reimbursement of Dupilumab for the treatment of atopic eczema; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37144/20]

189. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of the application for reimbursement of the drug Dupilumab to treat severe atopic eczema; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37265/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 165 and 189 together.

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

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

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

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE). The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions.

The HSE has advised that it has received pricing and reimbursement applications for two indications of Dupilumab (Dupixent®):

- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy.

- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE received an application for pricing / reimbursement of Dupilumab in November 2017 from the manufacturer for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy. The HSE commissioned a full HTA on 29 November 2017 as per agreed processes. This assessment was completed on 12 December 2019 with the NCPE recommending that Dupilumab be considered for reimbursement if cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

Subsequently, the HSE received an application for the pricing/reimbursement of Dupilumab on 13 December 2019 for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE commissioned the rapid review process on the 17 December 2019. Following receipt of a rapid review dossier, the NCPE advised the HSE on the 17 January 2020 that a HTA was not recommended and that Dupilumab not be considered for reimbursement for this indication at the submitted price.

The HSE engaged in commercial negotiations with the company in February 2020 regarding both the adult and adolescent populations.

The final HTA report concerning Dupilumab was reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group, along with the outputs of commercial negotiations, and the patient group submission received during the HTA process. The HSE Drugs Group considered all the evidence and gave a recommendation to the HSE EMT not to support reimbursement of Dupilumab for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in both adults and adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE has confirmed that the applicant company was issued with notice of the proposed decision of the HSE EMT not to support reimbursement on 21 August 2020. On 18 September 2020, the applicant company submitted representations with respect to this application.

The HSE reviewed these representations, as is required in such circumstances under the 2013 Act, and has engaged in a meeting in November 2020 with the applicant company to discuss the submission. The HSE advises that Dupilumab will be included on the agenda for the December HSE Drugs Group meeting at which the two applications and the submitted representations will be reconsidered.

Dupilumab remains under consideration with the HSE and a final decision will be made in line with the 2013 Health Act.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

166. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Health the length of time a person (details supplied) will have to wait for a hospital appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37150/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled

care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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

### **Health Services Provision**

167. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided to establish a renal dialysis unit in one of current health care facilities in County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37167/20]

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

### **Brexit Issues**

168. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37180/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In line with cross Government planning, the Department of Health, in conjunction with the HSE, the HPR and other health agencies, is continuing to work on a comprehensive and coordinated set of preparations to ensure the health sector is ready for Brexit.

While responding to Brexit has been a significant challenge for the health sector over recent years, certain no-deal Brexit contingency planning structures were helpful in providing a basis for my Department's response to the COVID 19 pandemic.

My Department will continue to work between now and the end of the transition period to

ensure continuity of access to health services as far as possible and the maintenance of public health post-Brexit.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

169. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the EU deal for 300 million Covid-19 vaccine doses; if he will report on the dose supply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37200/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Ireland is currently involved in an EU Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of member states to procure a portfolio of suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19. BioNTech/Pfizer is one of the vaccine suppliers that the Commission has negotiated with.

On 11 November, the European Commission approved an Advance Purchase Agreement (APA) with a pharmaceutical company, BioNTech-Pfizer, which provides for the initial purchase of 200 million doses on behalf of all EU Member States, plus an option to purchase up to a further 100 million doses, to be supplied once a vaccine has proven to be safe and effective against COVID-19. Ireland will be entitled to a pro rata share of these. The EU has also concluded APAs with AstraZeneca, Sanofi-Pasteur and Janssen (Johnson and Johnson).

While a number of media reports have pointed to the potential for a high degree of efficacy in relation to some of these vaccines, no vaccine for COVID-19 has yet been approved for use and usage of any vaccine is condition on their receipt of market authorisation from the European Medicines Agency.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

170. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the steps taken by his Department to ensure the necessary logistical supports are being put in place to ensure a potential Covid-19 vaccine will be distributed appropriately; the steps taken to further ensure the necessary supply of CO<sub>2</sub> and dry ice that may be required to both store and transport a potential Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37217/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Ireland is currently involved in an EU Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of member states to procure a portfolio of suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19.

I can assure the Deputy of the Government's commitment to the timely implementation of a COVID-19 immunisation programme, as soon as one or more vaccines in the portfolio are approved for use.

In this regard, a cross-Government High-Level Taskforce has been established to support and oversee the development and implementation of the programme. Logistics arrangements are amongst the range of matters which will be addressed in the context of the work of the Task Force and the State agencies and other stakeholders with which it will work.

### **Health Services Staff**

171. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of orthopaedic surgeons practising throughout the hospital and private healthcare system here. [37219/20]

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

### Health Services Provision

172. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if and when provision can be made to refer a person (details supplied) to the appropriate hospital setting to cater for a specific condition; if consideration will be given to referring the person to the United Kingdom in view that a suitable programme has been identified there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37235/20]

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

### Health Services Provision

173. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will be provided with an appropriate hospital bed at home for end of life care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37237/20]

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

### Hospital Appointments Status

174. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if a medical appointment can be secured for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37238/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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

### **Employment Rights**

175. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if her Department and the HSE will ensure that workers' rights and decent pay and conditions are adhered to in circumstances in which they spend public money on externally contracted services, specifically relating to private ambulances, in which it is alleged that paramedics working for HSE contracted private ambulance services are being paid low wages with no protections such as sick pay. [37244/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

176. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if reflexologists and other personal health and well-being therapists are allowed to operate under level 5 restrictions. [37248/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy is aware, the situation regarding COVID-19 has been, and continues to be, an evolving situation. COVID-19 is still having a major impact both here in Ireland and elsewhere.

On Tuesday 15 September the Government published 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19'. This Plan outlines our medium-term strategy for COVID-19 and sets out a Framework of 5 Levels which outline the broad measures which will apply depending on the level of the virus at any given time. It will be possible for different regions and counties to be at different levels, depending on prevailing epidemiological situation. The Plan is designed to help everyone – individuals, organisations and sectors – to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures that might be introduced to contain transmission of the virus. The intention is that Departments and sectors will provide guidance for specific sectors and activities in line with the 5 level framework.

At Level 5 of the Plan, only essential retail outlets and essential services are allowed to open to the public. The list of essential services that can remain open during Level 5 includes therapy services provided by a member of a designated profession within the meaning of section 3 of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (No. 27 of 2005). There are seventeen professions designated under the 2005 Act, which are encompassed in the list of essential services. These are: Dietitians, Dispensing Opticians, Medical Scientists, Occupational Therapists,

Optometrists, Physiotherapists (which includes Physical Therapists), Radiographers, Radiation Therapists, Social Workers, Speech and Language Therapists, Clinical Biochemists, Counsellors, Orthoptists, Podiatrists, Psychologists, Psychotherapists and Social Care Workers.

The public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and it provides advice to Government in line with the current epidemiological position. The latest public health advice on these matters is available at the links below and is updated on a regular basis:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-health/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>

<https://www.gov.ie/en/>

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

177. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if plans and guidelines are being drafted regarding the selling of Christmas trees under the different public health restriction levels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37252/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Firstly, I would like to assure you that the Government is committed to ensuring a balanced and proportionate response to COVID-19 by finding ways to implement public health measures in response to the pandemic in a way that is fair, reasonable and proportionate.

As you will be aware, in response to the rapidly deteriorating epidemiological situation across the country, Ireland has moved to level 5 of the Government's medium-term strategy for dealing with COVID-19, Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19

This 5 level Framework reflects a careful consideration of the impact of the introduction of restrictions on employment and livelihoods, keeping as many businesses open as possible at different stages, while acknowledging that some businesses and services are critical.

Any measures introduced at any level of the Plan are aimed at limiting the spread and damage of COVID-19, and are necessary to protect our key priorities of supporting and maintaining health and social care services, keeping education and childcare services open and protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

As I'm sure you can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. The number of people allowed to gather in different scenarios in the Government's Framework are based on a review of international practice and the judgment of public health experts. It seeks to balance the risks of different types of gatherings against the desire to allow normal activities to proceed in so far as possible.

At level 5 of the Plan, unfortunately, this means closing many businesses and amenities to reduce the person-to-person contacts which allow the virus to spread. At Level 5 essential retail and essential services will remain open. Further information on essential retail and essential services at Level 5 can be found at:<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#retail-and-services-for-example-hairdressers-beauticians-barbers>

Level 5 does not restrict people from purchasing any products. It does however, restrict

people from physically going into non-essential stores. This is to stop people travelling out of their homes unnecessarily and so to limit the spread of the virus.

While Christmas trees cannot be purchased physically in stores, customers can continue to purchase them via online or phone ordering and collection and delivery.

Further information on all levels of Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 is available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>.

The Deputy may wish to note that the cultivation of Christmas trees is a matter that comes under the remit of the Minister for Agriculture Food and Marine.

### **Occupational Therapy**

178. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, if he will publish each plan in respect of each CHO area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37253/20]

179. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO4; if he will provide a breakdown for north Cork, north Lee, south Lee, west Cork, Kerry in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37254/20]

180. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO1; if he will provide a breakdown for Donegal, Sligo/Leitrim/West Cavan, and Cavan/Monaghan in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37255/20]

181. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO2; if he will provide a breakdown for Galway, Roscommon, and Mayo in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37256/20]

182. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO3; if he will provide a breakdown for Clare, Limerick, and north Tipperary/east Limerick in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37257/20]

183. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO5; if he will provide a breakdown for south Tipperary, Carlow/Kilkenny, Waterford, and Wexford in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37258/20]

184. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO6;

if he will provide a breakdown for Wicklow, Dún Laoghaire, and Dublin south east in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37259/20]

185. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO7; if he will provide a breakdown for Kildare/west Wicklow, Dublin west, Dublin south city, and Dublin south west in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37260/20]

186. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO8; if he will provide a breakdown for Laois/Offaly, Longford/Westmeath, Louth, and Meath in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37261/20]

187. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount of extra funding that has been allocated to CHO9; if he will provide a breakdown for Dublin north, Dublin north central, and Dublin north west in tabular form; the staffing required to implement the plan; if moneys have been spent for that allocation; if so, the way that money has been spent and the areas that it has been spent. [37262/20]

188. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 280 of 15 October 2020, the amount that has been allocated in each CHO area to spend on external providers of assessment of needs and therapies and the amount paid to each provider by CHO in tabular form. [37263/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 178 to 188, inclusive, together.

The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

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

*Question No. 189 answered with Question No. 165.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

190. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding adult winter ‘flu vaccines (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37266/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** This season, 1.95 million doses of influenza vaccine have been purchased, which is double the amount administered last season. The HSE has procured 1.35 million doses of the Quadrivalent Influenza Vaccine (QIV) for the

forthcoming winter. This vaccine is being made available to all persons in an at-risk group and aged from 6 months up. In addition, the HSE has also purchased 600,000 doses of the Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine (LAIV), which is delivered via nasal drops rather than by injection and is being made available to all children aged from 2 to 12 years old inclusive.

Deliveries of this vaccine from the manufacturer were not as quick as we would have liked, due to the very challenging international market for flu vaccines. It is also true that demand for vaccination this year is unprecedented. This is the case across Europe and beyond, and in this context it is unlikely that additional supply will become available.

While I cannot comment on individual providers, I can confirm that 1.3 million of the 1.35 million doses of flu vaccine available this winter have been distributed to GPs, pharmacists and other vaccination sites since early October. Distribution of the remaining 50,000 doses will commence before the end of this month. In addition, 420,000 doses of the LAIV for administration to children aged from 2 to 12 have been distributed.

Demand for vaccination remains strong at this point and may exceed available supply. It is likely that the full amount procured, 1.35 million doses, will be distributed and administered. As a consequence, from the fourth round of deliveries which started on 23 October, GPs and pharmacists have been asked that of remaining patients in at-risk groups, priority should be given to the over-65s and healthcare workers with direct patient contact, in line with WHO advice.

The significant increase in uptake among those in the at-risk groups, combined with the addition of vaccination for children aged from 2 to 12, will help reduce the impact of influenza on the community and the health system.

### **Health Services**

191. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when a facility (details supplied) will receive sufficient rain shelter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37282/20]

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

### **National Maternity Hospital**

192. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if the lease of the site for the new National Maternity Hospital has been agreed with a group (details supplied); the status of negotiations on the lease; the duration of the lease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37293/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The St Vincent's Healthcare Group will provide the HSE with a 99 year lease for the site of the new maternity hospital at Elm Park. I am advised that while there are a small number of outstanding issues that remain to be resolved, it is hoped that the drafting of the Lease can be concluded shortly.

As the Deputy will be aware, a legal framework is being developed to protect the State's interest in the new hospital, of which the Lease is one constituent part.

However, as I have indicated previously, once finalised, the legal framework will be brought to Government for approval.

### **National Maternity Hospital**

193. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1139 of 3 November 2020, if the reply will be reconciled with the fact that the company (details supplied) will not retain the legal right to mortgage the hospital; the steps he will take to ensure that this provision in its constitution does not give it authority to mortgage any or all parts of the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37294/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** St Vincent's Holdings CLG will not hold a property interest in, all or part of, the new National Maternity Hospital. Under the legal framework currently being developed, St Vincent's Healthcare Group DAC (SVHG DAC) will lease a site to the State, and the State will provide an Operating Licence to the National Maternity Hospital at Elm Park DAC and SVHG DAC. The ability of SVHG DAC to mortgage, as contained in its Constitution, is being addressed within the legal framework and restrictions, as appropriate, will apply.

### **National Maternity Hospital**

194. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the timeline provided to transfer shares in a group (details supplied) to the HSE by a religious organisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37296/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My understanding is that the approval of the HSE is required to facilitate the transfer by the Religious Sisters of Charity of their shareholding in St Vincent's Healthcare Group (SVHG) to St Vincent's Holding CLG. I am advised that the SVHG has sought this approval and the parties are currently engaging. However, as the HSE would be best placed to provide the most up-to-date position on this matter, I have asked them to respond to you directly.

### **Emergency Departments**

195. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of admissions to accident and emergency departments as a result of accidents involving delivery vans, trucks, buses, cars, farm vehicles, bicycles, electric scooter, motorbikes; and if those admitted were drivers, passengers or pedestrians; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37300/20]

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

### **Emergency Departments**

196. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the data obtained by his Department relating to self-harm presentations to emergency department per day and emergency department during the period 27 March to 31 August 2020, including the data collected and collated by the HSE National Clinical Programme for the Assessment and Management of Patients presenting to emergency departments following self-harm. [37302/20]

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

as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

197. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the steps that have been taken to improve the quality of data on Covid-19 deaths both inside and outside of hospitals with respect to identifying persons for whom Covid-19 was the cause of death, a co-factor and a nosocomial infection, respectively. [37303/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the HSE to respond to the deputy directly.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

198. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to prioritising nursing and care home visitors for rapid Covid-19 testing when it becomes available in order to allow persons spend time with their loved ones; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37317/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Service Executive has adopted RNA PCR as the gold standard test for diagnosing Covid-19 cases, as part of the HSE test and trace strategy, consistent with international best practice, and approved by NPHE. This platform is deployed in acute hospitals, the NVRL and HSE's commercial partners. Given the volumes required, these operate as batch tests and hence take a number of hours depending on the platform and the volume being processed.

The HSE has worked intensively over the last number of months to put in place a comprehensive testing and tracing operation. We now have on-island capacity to test up to 126,000 people per week, which can be increased to 140,000 per week if the demand requires. It should be noted that testing for Sars-Cov2 does not confirm that an individual with a 'not detected' result is not incubating the infection or the level of virus is below detectable levels at the time of the test. It is for this reason, for example, that testing of close contacts of a confirmed case is carried out on two separate occasions, when they are first identified and again 7 days after their last contact with the person.

Ireland is pursuing a robust testing strategy under the guidance of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). On an ongoing basis, NPHE considers and reviews, based on public health risk assessments, how best to target testing to hunt the virus in populations where it's most likely and where it will do most harm.

Many of the rapid Covid tests reported in the public domain and in the media which purport to offer a test result in minutes (for example antigen tests) lack the sensitivity and specificity required for healthcare. The HSE is constantly monitoring the sensitivity of all types of tests that are available (e.g. antigen and saliva tests) to ensure that, if deployed, they would be of appropriate quality and sensitivity. This issue continues to be monitored by the WHO, ECDC, HIQA, and the HSE Laboratory taskforce.

It should be noted that testing for Covid-19 only provides a point-in-time result. It confers no guarantee that an individual with a 'not detected' result is not incubating the infection or the level of virus is below detectable levels at the time of the test. It is for this reason, for example, that testing of close contacts of a confirmed case is carried out on two separate occasions, when

they are first identified and again 7 days after their last contact with the person.

The testing strategy in use in Ireland remains under consideration by NPHE on an ongoing basis.

### **Drug and Alcohol Task Forces**

199. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health the additional funding, assistance and resources he plans to provide to a service (details supplied) in 2021; if his attention has been drawn to the importance of the matter in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37330/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** Budget 2021 allocated €10m in new developments for drugs policy and inclusion health.

Of this, €4m was allocated to provide for the implementation of the national drugs strategy to enhance drug and alcohol services as follows:

- €1m to develop targeted drug and alcohol initiatives through the network of drug and alcohol task forces, and to increase in core funding for existing services

- €2m to increase residential treatment services for people with severe drug and alcohol dependency across the country, including a step-up stabilisation facility in CHOs Cork/Kerry, Mid-West and South East and a low threshold programme in Dublin North East Inner City

- €560,000 to expand community and family support services, including initiatives in Donegal/Leitrim/Sligo, Louth/Meath and Dublin North Inner City.

- €390,000 for drug prevention and information initiatives, including pilot drug monitoring at festivals and the night-time economy and expanded access to the drugs and alcohol helpline.

A further €4m was allocated to address the addiction and mental health needs of people who are homeless as follows:

- €1m to provide health supports for 218 new tenancies under the Housing First programme.

- €1.55m to develop and deliver a customised health care plan for 1,300 single people living in emergency accommodation

- €1.4m to provide additional services for people who are homeless with complex health needs, including those with chronic mental health issues and those leaving hospitals or other treatment services.

A further €2m was allocated to enhance access to health services for other socially excluded groups, as follows:

- €870,000 to improve access to healthcare services for the Roma community and other vulnerable migrants across all CHOs

- €270,000 to expand Traveller health units, as a first phase of the forthcoming HSE Traveller health action plan

- €750,000 to enhance healthcare services for the c 8,000 asylum seekers and refugees living in direct provision

- €175,000 for initiatives for victims of domestic violence and the LGBTI+ community.

Further details of the measures will be set out the HSE national service plan for 2021.

I would advise Tallaght Drug and Alcohol Task Force to contact their community healthcare organisation to enquire about the allocation of new funding to their locality.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

200. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of waiving the assessment fees for rehabilitative and detox treatment programmes. [37331/20]

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

### **Home Help Service**

201. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health the reason the home help service in the Ringsend, Dublin 4 area is not being adequately funded resulting in the service not being able to take on new clients or to increase hours to existing clients; and if funding to this vital service will be increased to allow it to continue its work. [37335/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Nursing Education**

202. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health his plans to review and enhance student and intern nurses pay in view of the fact that many fourth-year students are due to sign work placement contracts in the coming weeks. [37354/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE continues to fund the employment of fourth year student nurses and midwives who are on rostered work placements in hospital settings, including those scheduled to commence in the coming weeks and those fourth year students who are to commence rostered work placement in 2021.

These fourth student nurses and midwives on rostered work placement are paid at the approved rate as detailed on the HSE salary scale of €22,229 (annualised - psychiatric nursing specialism) and €21,749 (annualised - all other nursing specialisms).

In addition there are other supports open to all eligible nursing students:

An accommodation allowance available for eligible nursing students which amounts up to €50.79 a week for the duration of the placement where it is necessary for the student to obtain accommodation away from his/her normal place of residence.

A travel allowance is also available to eligible nursing students.

My Department is currently reviewing arrangements for this year's student nurses on clinical placements, taking into account the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on such placements and expects to conclude this review shortly.

## Hospital Car Parks

203. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to introduce a cap on the maximum daily charge for parking at public hospitals for patients and visitors; his further plans to introduce flexible passes in all hospitals for patients and their families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37358/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Programme for Government makes a commitment to introduce a cap on the maximum daily charge for patients and visitors at all public hospitals where possible, and to introduce flexible passes in all public hospitals for patients and their families.

My Department and the HSE are currently engaging on this issue.

## HSE National Service Plan

204. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE service plan for 2021 will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37359/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Legislation (Health Act 2004 as amended) outlines the timeframes that must be adhered to in the publication of the National Service Plan. This outlines that my Department must write to the Health Service Executive to notify it of its allocation for 2021 not later than 21 days after the publication by the Government of the Estimates for Public Services. I formally notified the HSE of its Financial allocation in a 'letter of Determination' which issued on 3rd November 2020. The legislation further provides that, on receipt of the letter of this determination, the Executive has 21 days to prepare and submit its Service Plan for 2021 for my approval. For NSP 2021, the HSE are currently working to a deadline of 24 November, however I can if required extend this deadline.

Following the submission of the service plan, the legislation provides 21 days for me to examine the proposed plan and either:

- a) approve the service plan in the form it is submitted,
- b) approve the service plan with such amendments as I, having consulted with the Executive, may determine, or
- c) issue a direction to the Executive to amend the plan.

The National Service Plan must be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas within 21 days of its approval. Once the Service Plan is laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas, the HSE will ensure it is published at the earliest possible time.

## General Practitioner Services

205. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the action his Department is taking to address the problem of poor general practitioner coverage in areas of disadvantage; his views on the adequacy of the current practice supports for premises in this regard; the progress in introducing salaried general practitioners as a means of addressing the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37360/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Government is aware of the work-

force issues currently facing general practice, including the limited access to GP services in certain areas, and has implemented a number of measures to improve recruitment and retention in general practice.

These include changes to the entry provisions to the GMS scheme to accommodate more flexible/shared GMS GP contracts, and to the retirement provisions for GPs under the GMS scheme, allowing GPs to hold GMS contracts until their 72nd birthday. Supports for rural GP practices have been enhanced, while the Agreement also includes increased support for GPs working in disadvantaged urban areas.

The 2019 Agreement on GP contractual reforms will see the Government increase investment in general practice by approximately 40% (€210 million) between 2019 and 2023, providing for significant increases in capitation fees for GPs who participate in the reform programme and the introduction of new fees and subsidies for additional services such as the chronic disease programme.

Improved family friendly arrangements are an important feature of the revised contractual arrangements, with an increase in the locum rate for maternity and paternity cover, and an increase in the paternity leave allowance from 3 days to 2 weeks.

In addition, the number of GPs entering training has been increased steadily over the past ten years, rising from 120 in 2009 to 214 in 2020, with a further increase foreseen in 2021.

I believe that these measures and supports will see a needed increase in the number of GPs working in the State, improving access to GP services for patients throughout the country.

GPs are private practitioners who hold contracts with the HSE to provide services under various public health schemes; there are no plans at present to directly employ general practitioners. The 2019 GP Agreement includes a commitment to undertake a strategic review of GP services within the lifetime of the Agreement, to examine how best to ensure the provision of GP services in Ireland for the future. The outcome of this review will inform future contractual changes, with preparatory work for the review having begun this year.

## **Health Services**

**206. Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the current resource allocation system in use to ensure health resources are allocated fairly and in proportion to need; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37361/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A clear governance and accountability framework was identified as a key building block of Sláintecare by the Committee on the Future of Healthcare. As part of its recommendations in this area, the Committee called for the HSE to become a more strategic and patient-focused ‘national centre’ carrying out national level functions, and the establishment of regional bodies with responsibility for the planning and delivery of integrated care at a regional level. The new Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, recommits to this Sláintecare recommendation, stating “Enhanced governance and accountability in the health service is a key component of Sláintecare reform. The HSE Board is now in place and we must now bring forward detailed proposals on the six new regional health areas to deliver services for patients locally that are safe, high quality and fairly distributed.”

As agreed, when the new Regional Health Areas geographies were announced last summer, a business plan for the establishment of these health areas was expected to be brought to Government for its approval in 2020. The intention was that this plan would set out the high-

level organisational design for the health system, including: the respective roles, functions, responsibilities and accountabilities of the Department of Health, HSE centre and new regional structures; the relationship between these entities; and the overall legal construct. Work was underway in the Department of Health and the HSE to develop these detailed proposals, in consultation with stakeholders. Understandably, this work was paused as a result of COVID-19. This programme of work will be given further consideration to take account of the Programme for Government commitment and any new considerations relating to COVID-19.

The programme plan to support the development of the Regional Health Areas included a focus on the development of resource allocation modelling on the basis of population needs assessment. One of the goals of the regional devolvement of health services is the concept of “one region, one budget”. A key factor in implementing this goal will be determining the methodology and approach to the allocation of resources, on a population basis which takes account of need. Clearly, the way in which resources are allocated will be determined by the nature of services provided at national, regional and supraregional level, as well as the governance that determines the flow of resources. It is critical that the approach to resource allocation is equitable, quality-driven, responsive to population health needs, outcomes focussed and sets up regions to deliver best outcomes for available resources. This will be a significant undertaking but one that is critical to the reorganisation of the health and social care service and the operation of regional structures. The initial focus of this work will be on conducting an “as is” mapping of current resource allocation, learning from international approaches, feasibility and readiness assessment and stakeholder engagement. This will inform and enable work to then commence on specification of a geographic resource allocation formula.

### **Home Care Packages**

207. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if additional home support services specifically for Sundays will be provided for a person (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37363/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

208. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health his views on reports of teachers having their ‘flu jab cancelled to prioritise other types of front-line workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37376/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Government has expanded the provision of seasonal influenza vaccination without charge to all of those in the HSE-defined at-risk groups, including healthcare workers, and to all children aged from 2 to 12 years. By providing vaccination to those most at-risk, and those most likely to require hospitalisation if they contract influenza, it is anticipated that the programme will see a reduction in the number of influenza-related hospital admissions, as well as a reduction in the overall spread of influenza in the community. This approach is in line with the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee.

This season, 1.95 million doses of influenza vaccine have been purchased, which is double the amount administered last season. The HSE has procured 1.35 million doses of the Quadri-

valent Influenza Vaccine (QIV) for administration to all persons in an at-risk group, as well as 600,000 doses of the Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine (LAIV) for all children aged from 2 to 12 years old inclusive.

As with other persons, teachers who are in an at-risk category, are eligible for vaccination without charge under the influenza vaccination programme. Those teachers not covered by the publicly funded influenza vaccination programme avail of influenza vaccination from GPs and pharmacists on a private basis.

1.3 million of the 1.35 million doses of flu vaccine available this winter have now been distributed to GPs, pharmacists and other vaccination sites since early October. In addition, 420,000 doses of the LAIV for administration to children aged from 2 to 12 have been distributed. Demand for vaccination remains strong at this point and may exceed available supply. It is likely that the full amount procured, 1.35 million doses, will be distributed and administered. Given the situation on the international market, it is not likely that additional supply will be possible. As a consequence, from the fourth round of deliveries which started on 23 October, GPs and pharmacists have been asked that of remaining patients in at-risk groups, priority should be given to the over-65s and healthcare workers with direct patient contact, in line with WHO advice.

Each year a certain amount of vaccine is “held back” to ensure those in at-risk groups receive vaccines. With the unprecedented demand this year it is important that the HSE manage the distribution of the remaining doses in order to target administration to the at-risk groups who need it the most. The distribution of the final 50,000 doses will commence by the end of this month.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

209. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if he considers teachers, SNAs and school staff to be front-line workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37377/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I would like to acknowledge and commend the incredible effort made in all school communities throughout the country to continue to operate during the Covid-19 pandemic in the safest manner possible. The strong belief that schools are places of education, equity, opportunity and healthcare is coupled with the belief that they are places of safety during Covid-19 with the clear focussed attention to mitigating measures and Infection Prevention and Control recommendations as laid out in the national guidance documents for the education sector.

You may wish to note that my Department has been working closely with the Department of Education and the HSE to enhance the public health response to Covid-19 within educational facilities and the HSE’s Schools Working Group has supported this response through the provision of a Central Administration Team. The Schools Working Group has further supported the necessary communications and documents which have been required over the course of the return to school. Further information on the Health Protection Surveillance Centre’s (HPSC) Guidance for the Education sector is available here:- <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/>.

I would like to assure you that the HSE will continue to work with our educational partners advising parents, pupils and staff of the importance of adherence to national public health measures to ensure schools can remain open in a safe environment.

Measures such as those introduced at level 5 are aimed at limiting the spread and damage of

COVID-19, and are necessary to protect what our key priorities of supporting and maintaining health and social care services, keeping education and childcare services open and protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

### **Brexit Issues**

210. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of his Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37171/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Brexit poses enormous challenges for the agrifood and fisheries sectors by virtue of their exposure to the UK market. The UK is our largest market, with exports of €5.5 billion in 2019. This represents 38% of total agrifood exports in 2019. The UK also remains our largest import market, with imports of €4.6 billion in 2019.

If there is no agreement in the EU-UK negotiations, tariffs will apply on exports to and imports from Great Britain. My Department estimates a total tariff burden of €2 - €2.5 billion on overall trade (exports and imports). This would have a very negative impact across the entire sector.

Even with an agreement, the need to comply with the new customs and regulatory requirements will increase the cost of trade and will result in delays in the movement of animals and goods, although every effort will be made to ensure the minimum possible disruption to trade flows and supply chains.

With fewer than 50 days until the end of the transition period, time is very short and businesses in the agrifood sector need to urgently take action to ensure they are prepared for the enduring changes that will arise on 1st January 2021.

### **Fisheries Protection**

211. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to have the Navy board any of the factory vessels currently fishing off the west coast for mackerel to check them for compliance with the Common Fisheries Policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37197/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I should advise the Deputy that the monitoring and control of fishing vessels within Ireland's Exclusive Fisheries Zone are law enforcement matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act, 2006, all operational issues of this nature are exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and the Naval Service. I am expressly precluded from getting involved in operational matters such as those referred to by the Deputy.

Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's requests to the SFPA for attention and direct reply.

### **European Council Meetings**

212. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way the position of Ireland fared at the AGRIFISH Council negotiations on CAP reform; and if any of the key positions of Ireland were accepted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37198/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Agri-fish Council of Ministers reached an agreed general approach on the CAP Reform Package on 21st October, after more than two years of negotiations. The Council now has a political mandate and trilogue negotiations are underway with the European Parliament and Commission. However, until overall agreement has been achieved we will not have certainty on the final shape of the CAP.

The Council position includes the proposed introduction of mandatory ECO schemes into the system of direct payments, and an enhanced baseline for environmental conditionality. A ring-fenced budgetary amount for ECO schemes of 20% of the direct payment budget has been agreed by Agriculture Ministers, with a two-year so-called 'learning' period permitted at the start of the CAP Strategic Plan, to allow Member States avoid any loss of unspent funds due to lower-than-expected take-up of ECO schemes.

I welcome the proposed introduction of new ECO schemes. Farmers will access these funds by undertaking additional actions which go beyond the basic environmental requirements. Member States will design schemes based on their own analysis of needs.

The Council position also provides Member States with an option to cap the basic income support for sustainability at €100,000. There will also be flexibility to reduce such payments above €60,000. There is a focus on support for young farmers and an amount equal to 2% of the Direct Payments envelope must be spent on attracting and sustaining young farmers.

I am satisfied that Ireland's interests have been protected in the Council agreement. My officials will continue to monitor progress in the trilogue negotiations, and to progress work on the development of Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan, including through ongoing consultation with stakeholders via the CAP Consultative Committee.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

213. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a court order in favour of a bank regarding a single farm payment can be transferred to another lending institution that subsequently purchased the loan and the legislation that is relied upon for such a transfer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37210/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The granting of court orders is a matter for the Courts and my Department is obliged to comply with any court order which is served on it in accordance with the terms of that order. The legislation underpinning the decision in relation to any court order is a matter for the Court.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

214. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a garnishee order can be granted in respect of a single farm payment; if this order will be transferred to discharge a debt that has been purchased by another lending institution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37212/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The granting of court orders is a matter for the Courts and my Department is obliged to comply with any court order which is served on it in accordance with the terms of that order.

### **Basic Payment Scheme**

215. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when BPS payments will issue to farmers (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37223/20]

216. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of farmers awaiting BPS payments due to software issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37224/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 215 and 216 together.

My Department received over 129,000 applications in 2020 for the basic payment scheme, of which just over 122,000 are currently eligible. To date, over 120,000 farmers have received almost €800m in advance payments and payments have continued since they commenced on the 16th October. This represents a greater amount of money paid to more farmers than in any year of the current CAP programme.

There are many issues which may delay a payment to a farmer and, unfortunately, there are always a number of complex cases that take somewhat longer to resolve than usual. My Department is committed to continuous improvement of service and we are acutely aware that resolving such complex cases in the past has led to such delays in issuing payments to farmers. Continuous systems development is required to improve payment delivery and customer service.

Officials in my Department are currently working to address the issue highlighted by the Deputy and will have it resolved in the near future. It is estimated that fewer than 1,000 farmers in total are affected by this issue, with a significant number of these having more than one issue to resolve.

### **Agriculture Scheme Eligibility**

217. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there are circumstances which allow a person older than 35 years of age to apply for a green cert in order to ensure continuity of a family farm; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37276/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Teagasc deliver the Green Cert Programme on a full-time, part-time and distance education basis in the Agricultural Colleges and Regional Education Centres. I am advised by Teagasc that there is no upper age limit on the Green Cert course entry.

Promoting generational renewal is a priority and there are supports available for young farmers, both under the CAP and through national measures. Taxation measures for young trained farmers, such as 100% Stamp Duty relief and 100% Stock Relief, require the farmer to be aged under 35 years.

### **Animal Sales**

218. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a list of the marts registered under the AIMS system including the Eircode will be provided; and if he will report on the operation of the system in marts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37304/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Live-stock Marts approved by my Department interact with the Animal, Identification and Movement (AIM) database via a webservice system. Animals presented for sale at marts are notified in real time to the AIM database. The marts own web service system identifies those bovines which move into the mart and interacts with AIM. Relevant information relating to each bovine is returned from the AIM system via the webservice to the marts computerised system prior to commencement of the sale.

The details of the outward movement of bovines from the livestock mart must be returned within seven days of the movement but this process is generally closed off by the mart within a 24-hour period.

A list of livestock marts is attached whereby the eircode is provided in respect of those marts that supplied this information to the Department.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-11-18\_pq218-18-11-20\_en.xlsx">List of Marts</a>]

### **Brexit Issues**

219. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her views on whether Brexit will have a positive impact on any policy area or sector under the remit of her Department; and if the details of same will be provided. [37184/20]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** On 1 January 2021, the transition period following the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union will have ended and many aspects of our relationship with our nearest neighbour will change fundamentally.

However, the Government remains committed to protecting and strengthening the Ireland-UK relationship. Strong and vibrant connections are vital with our closest neighbour and trading partner. Both Ireland and the UK remain co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and are committed to the ongoing maintenance of the Common Travel Area and its associated rights and privileges which is of particular importance to those living and working in border communities.

While we will work with our UK colleagues on strengthening this relationship, it is also clear that Brexit, in any form, will have significant impacts on economic sectors and communities in rural Ireland.

The supports and funding provided by my Department to build up resilience in communities to withstand negative Brexit impacts is more important than ever and we will continue to retain flexibility within our programmes to ensure we can respond to emerging needs in communities in all parts of the country as they arise.