

Oireachtas COVID-19 Queries for answer by 17 April 2020

Question

To ask the Minister for Health to clarify the locations of the Direct Provision Centres which have confirmed clusters of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Catherine Connolly TD

To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons who have contracted Covid-19 while resident in Direct Provision; the actions he is taking to ameliorate this to protect the health and well being of those within the Direct Provision and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Carol Nolan TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I propose to answer these questions together.

As the Deputy will appreciate, as well as the obligation not to identify applicants for international protection under Section 26 of the International Protection Act 2015, planning for the management of the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic is being led by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The identification of and reporting on any clusters, outbreaks or confirmed cases of Covid-19 is a matter for NPHE and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre.

The NPHE's policy is to maintain patient confidentiality at all times. It is also the policy of my Department that we maintain the confidentiality of International Protection applicants at all times and therefore we do not comment on any individuals who avail of our services. As the Deputy will appreciate, international protection applicants have the same right to privacy and medical confidentiality as everyone else.

I can assure the Deputy that we are working closely with the HSE and with our accommodation centre managers to manage the response to the COVID-19 crisis. In particular the International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) of my Department is working with the National Social Inclusion team of the HSE and is following all its advice. IPAS will continue to respond to all medical advices received working with the HSE in a collaborative and proactive manner. In that regard, a dedicated team has also been established in IPAS to manage issues relating to COVID-19 in accommodation centres (including in emergency accommodation locations). This unit is in constant contact with all of our premises.

Last week, Minister Flanagan and I announced new measures to support residents during the COVID crisis. We have procured 850 new temporary hotel beds to:

1. support the measures required for vulnerable residents;
2. provide offsite accommodation for self-isolation; and
3. help with social distancing measures by reducing overall numbers in some existing centres.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents and is additional to the new accommodation centres which we have opened recently in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. To date this year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary additional beds have been procured by the Department.

Finally, both Minister Flanagan and I would like to recognise and record our appreciation for the dedication and commitment of our accommodation centre managers and their staff in protecting the

welfare and safety of our residents during this uncertain time. They are providing an essential frontline service away from their own homes and families on behalf of the State.

Question

To ask the Minister for Health what facilities are in place in the two Direct Provision Centres in Galway to accommodate residents who are vulnerable and/or symptomatic and/or who have contracted Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Catherine Connolly TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I can inform the Deputy that intensive work has been underway in the Department since the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that, to the best of our ability, we protect the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of our accommodation services.

In all measures we are taking, we are guided by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team. We are working in particular with the HSE National Social Inclusion team and following all its advice. Our centre managers are working closely with the Department, the HSE and residents to ensure that centres are safe and that guidelines on social distancing are observed.

In recent weeks, the Department has established four dedicated self-isolation facilities and opened additional temporary accommodation centres to support social distancing and the measures required for vulnerable residents, with a combined total of 850 new temporary bed spaces. The accommodation secured in Galway will provide 152 of the additional 850 beds.

The self-isolation accommodation has a capacity of 299 rooms in dedicated facilities in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk. Residents staying in self-isolation facilities will have their own bedroom and their own bathroom. In addition we have partnered with the HSE and non-profit (Section 39) organisations to ensure that residents in the self-isolation centres can be cared for on-site by health and social care personnel.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents and is additional to the new accommodation centres which we have opened recently in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. To date this year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary new beds have been procured by the Department.

In consultation with the HSE, we have relocated around 600 of our residents to the new temporary accommodation over the last three weeks to support social distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. Cocooning measures are required for people who fall within one of the six criteria of serious medical illnesses published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on 26 March 2020. These are the specific criteria that are helping to determine who in our centres is considered vulnerable at this time. We have already gone further than the HSE guidelines by implementing cocooning measures for all those aged 65 years or older. We have also cocooned all those identified to us by the HSE as having serious medical illnesses and this process is ongoing.

All accommodation centres including emergency centres have completed contingency plans for COVID-19. These plans are actively reviewed by IPAS to promote shared learning and best practice across centres. The nine HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHO) regions assessed all centres where people are living in congregated settings to establish their state of readiness and provided appropriate advice to assist.

Public health information has been distributed to all centres on an ongoing basis, guided by public health advice. HSE information notices have been circulated to all centres and translations have also been provided.

In addition, each centre has been asked to generate onsite self-isolation capacity for use by persons suspected to have the virus. Any COVID-19 suspected or confirmed case, outbreak or contacts are

managed by Public Health which also advises on follow up actions, such as control measures including isolation.

To support social distancing and to reduce contacts in the centres, centres are currently closed to visitors. Centres without independent living arrangements (where applicants can cook for themselves and their families) have been asked to implement staggered meal times or to provide takeaway facilities where canteens have been temporarily closed.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, we have also put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. This service will also be used to advise, support and work with those locations where vulnerable groups are present in respect of the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Question

To ask the Minister for Health if he is satisfied that the provision of additional emergency accommodation for people living in Direct Provision will adequately enable residents' compliance with the Government guidelines in relation to social distancing, self-isolation and treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Catherine Connolly TD

30. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the measures taken to protect the health and safety of those seeking asylum or that are currently in the direct provision system with regard to the outbreak of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Duncan Smith TD

607. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality what measures are being implemented to ensure that residents of direct provision centres and emergency direct provision accommodation have access to soap and hand sanitizer during the Covid19 crisis? --Roderic O'Gorman TD

608. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality to outline what measures have been taken to reduce overcrowding in direct provision centres to better facilitate social distancing and can he outline what further measures he proposed to implement to further facilitate social distancing? --Roderic O'Gorman TD

784. To ask the Minister for Justice & Equality what emergency measures have been put in place for persons in direct provision during the Covid19 pandemic to allow them to self isolate and if currently idle student accommodation could be considered for use? --Rose Conway-Walsh TD

839. To ask the Minister for Justice & Equality what emergency measures have been put in place for persons in direct provision during the Covid19 pandemic to allow them to self isolate and if currently idle student accommodation could be considered for use? --Gary Gannon TD

1012. To ask the Minister for Justice & Equality what emergency measures have been put in place for persons in direct provision during the Covid19 pandemic to allow them to self isolate and if currently idle student accommodation could be considered for use? --Chris Andrews TD

1027. To ask the Minister for Justice How many of the proposed 650 extra bed spaces promised to ease overcrowding in direct provision centres have been provided to date? Additionally in relation to direct provision if he can clarify the following;

What is the timeline to ensure social-distancing in direct provision centres by providing additional / suitable accommodation?

Are 650 places sufficient for this? How are these places allocated?

What audits and checks are in place to ensure companies running these centres are complying with COVID/Government regulations?

Have all people at risk (with previous medical conditions etc) been identified and relocated?

--Brid Smith TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I propose to answer these questions together.

I can inform the Deputy that intensive work has been underway in the Department since the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that, to the best of our ability, we protect the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of our accommodation services.

In all measures we are taking, we are guided by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team. We are working in particular with the HSE National Social Inclusion team and following all its

advice. Our centre managers are working closely with the Department, the HSE and residents to ensure that centres are safe and that guidelines on social distancing are observed.

In recent weeks, the Department has established four dedicated self-isolation facilities and opened additional temporary accommodation centres to support social distancing and the measures required for vulnerable residents, with a combined total of 850 new temporary bed spaces.

The self-isolation accommodation has a capacity of 299 rooms in dedicated facilities in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk. Residents staying in self-isolation facilities will have their own bedroom and their own bathroom. In addition we have partnered with the HSE and non-profit (Section 39) organisations to ensure that residents in the self-isolation centres can be cared for on-site by health and social care personnel.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents and is additional to the new accommodation centres which we have opened recently in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. To date this year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary new beds have been procured by the Department.

In consultation with the HSE, we have relocated around 600 of our residents to the new temporary accommodation over the last three weeks to support social distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. The new accommodation that we have procured means that we can ensure that no more than 3 single people are sharing a room (similar to a small sized family unit) in any of our centres during this public health crisis. The vast majority of the rooms in the new accommodation are twin rooms, accommodating two people. If any person is being accommodated in these locations based on an identified vulnerability (age or medical condition), they have their own bedroom and their own bathroom to facilitate their cocooning.

Cocooning measures are required for people who fall within one of the six criteria of serious medical illnesses published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on 26 March 2020. These are the specific criteria that are helping to determine who in our centres is considered vulnerable at this time. We have already gone further than the HSE guidelines by implementing cocooning measures for all those aged 65 years or older. We have also cocooned all those identified to us by the HSE as having serious medical illnesses and this process is ongoing.

A senior official from my Department has also written to the Presidents of the Universities of Sanctuary to ask if they would consider providing accommodation and related services for their University of Sanctuary students who are ordinarily resident in Direct Provision during this time. Consultations in relation to this are ongoing; however, it must be said that some Universities are continuing to provide accommodation to their international students so not all accommodation is currently available for use.

All accommodation centres including emergency centres have completed contingency plans for COVID-19. These plans are actively reviewed by IPAS to promote shared learning and best practice across centres. The nine HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHO) regions assessed all centres where people are living in congregated settings to establish their state of readiness and provided appropriate advice to assist.

Public health information has been distributed to all centres on an ongoing basis, guided by public health advice. HSE information notices have been circulated to all centres and translations have also been provided.

In addition, each centre has been asked to generate onsite self-isolation capacity for use by persons suspected to have the virus. Any COVID-19 suspected or confirmed case, outbreak or contacts are managed by Public Health which also advises on follow up actions, such as control measures including isolation.

To support social distancing and to reduce contacts in the centres, centres are currently closed to visitors. Centres without independent living arrangements (where applicants can cook for themselves and their families) have been asked to implement staggered meal times or to provide takeaway facilities where canteens have been temporarily closed.

Residents have also been made aware of the need for social distancing, good hand hygiene and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Information and posters have been distributed to all centres and translations of public health information have also been provided.

During this time, centre managers have been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. Each manager must ensure that their centre has adequate supplies of cleaning products, soap, sanitiser, tissues and wipes. Hygiene products are distributed to international protection applicants as required. My Department has procured a large volume of hand sanitiser for residents and staff across our network of centres and this has now been distributed by courier to all of our centres. A regular supply of hand sanitiser is in place and this will be distributed to centres as required.

Our website www.accommodationcentres.ie has been adapted to include a new section where public health information and trusted online information sources have been consolidated and we are encouraging all residents to visit the site.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, we have also put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. This service will also be used to advise, support and work with those locations where vulnerable groups are present in respect of the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Question

118. To ask the Minister for Justice if he will look at the specific case of Cuin Direct Provision Centre and ensure that all the inhabitants of this facility are housed appropriately to their needs during the course of this crisis and to make a statement on the matter. --Richard Boyd Barrett TD

302. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the new arrangements being put in place to protect those in direct provision during the current covid-19 crisis; if he is aware of particular concerns raised in respect of a centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. (Ciúin House, The Paddocks, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim) --Seán Haughey TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I propose to answer these questions together.

My Department takes any complaints from residents very seriously and all residents are made fully aware of their ability to contact the Department at any time in confidence. Residents can also avail of the services of the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children, as appropriate.

Officials from my Department have spoken with management from the premises referred to by the Deputy. They have assured my officials that they are fully committed to supporting their residents through this difficult time. They stressed that they have always had a positive relationship with their residents. Department officials have seen evidence of this good relationship first hand in previous unannounced visits to the property and they accept that they are acting in good faith in their current interactions with residents. They have also assured us that they are fully committed to implementing all HSE guidance on COVID-19. They have implemented new measures in the dining room to promote social distancing and reduce contacts between families at mealtimes.

More generally, I can inform the Deputy that intensive work has been underway in the Department since the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that, to the best of our ability, we protect the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of our accommodation services.

In all measures we are taking, we are guided by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team. We are working in particular with the HSE National Social Inclusion team and following all its advice. Our centre managers are working closely with the Department, the HSE and residents to ensure that centres are safe and that guidelines on social distancing are observed.

In recent weeks, the Department has established four dedicated self-isolation facilities and opened additional temporary accommodation centres to support social distancing and the measures required for vulnerable residents, with a combined total of 850 new temporary bed spaces.

The self-isolation accommodation has a capacity of 299 rooms in dedicated facilities in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk. Residents staying in self-isolation facilities will have their own bedroom and their own bathroom. In addition we have partnered with the HSE and non-profit (Section 39) organisations to ensure that residents in the self-isolation centres can be cared for on-site by health and social care personnel.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents and is additional to the new accommodation centres which we have opened recently in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. To date this year, over 1,550 beds have been procured by the Department.

In consultation with the HSE, we have relocated around 600 of our residents to the new temporary accommodation over the last three weeks to support social distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. The new accommodation that we have procured means that we can

ensure that no more than 3 single people are sharing a room (similar to a small sized family unit) in any of our centres during this public health crisis. The vast majority of the rooms in the new accommodation are twin rooms, accommodating two people. If any person is being accommodated in these locations based on an identified vulnerability (age or medical condition), they have their own bedroom and their own bathroom to facilitate their cocooning.

Cocooning measures are required for people who fall within one of the six criteria of serious medical illnesses published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on 26 March 2020. These are the specific criteria that are helping to determine who in our centres is considered vulnerable at this time. We have already gone further than the HSE guidelines by implementing cocooning measures for all those aged 65 years or older. We have also cocooned all those identified to us by the HSE as having serious medical illnesses and this process is ongoing.

A senior official from my Department has also written to the Presidents of the Universities of Sanctuary to ask if they would consider providing accommodation and related services for their University of Sanctuary students who are ordinarily resident in Direct Provision during this time. Consultations in relation to this are ongoing; however, it must be said that some Universities are continuing to provide accommodation to their international students so not all accommodation is currently available for use.

All accommodation centres including emergency centres have completed contingency plans for COVID-19. These plans are actively reviewed by IPAS to promote shared learning and best practice across centres. The nine HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHO) regions assessed all centres where people are living in congregated settings to establish their state of readiness and provided appropriate advice to assist.

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During this time, centre managers have been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. Each manager must ensure that their centre has adequate supplies of cleaning products, soap, sanitiser, tissues and wipes. Hygiene products are distributed to international protection applicants as required. My Department has procured a large volume of hand sanitiser for residents and staff across our network of centres and this has now been distributed by courier to all of our centres. A regular supply of hand sanitiser is in place and this will be distributed to centres as required.

Our website www.accommodationcentres.ie has been adapted to include a new section where public health information and trusted online information sources have been consolidated and we are encouraging all residents to visit the site.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, we have also put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. This service will also be used to advise, support and work with those locations where vulnerable groups are present in respect of the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Question

28. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the health and safety preparations his Department is preparing with regard to staff and inmates in prisons in relation to the Covid-19 outbreak; and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Duncan Smith TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

It is clear that Covid-19 provides unique challenges to custodial institutions including our prisons and Covid-19 in a prison setting would present significant challenges for prison management in terms of controlling the spread of the virus amongst staff and prisoners, and the provision of appropriate medical treatment to affected persons.

Recognising these challenges, the Director General of the Irish Prison Service at an early stage established an Emergency Response Planning Team ("ERPT") consisting of senior staff with skills and experience in areas including including operational; healthcare; and infection control. ERPT was tasked with identifying and issuing instruction on the necessary actions with the aim of:

- Blocking the spread of Covid-19 into a prison setting;
- Early detection of any possible case of Covid-19 in a prisoner or staff member; and
- Prevention of the spread of Covid-19, should a case be confirmed.

A significant amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service in this regard. I understand that the actions of the Irish Prison Service are informed and guided by the advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and consistent with the prison specific guidance for the management of Covid-19 issued by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 15 March 2020.

Some of the measures and actions taken are as follows.

In the first instance and as the Deputy may be aware, I approved a number of actions to reduce the number of prisoners in our prisons in March this year to support a more effective infection control regime, including greater physical distancing, cocooning and so on. This included the granting of temporary release to low risk prisoners, who were assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Restrictions on access to prisons have also been introduced in a phased manner. Restrictions were placed on family visits to prisons, culminating in the suspension of visits with effect from 28 March 2020. It is important to say however that the Irish Prison Service has introduced an electronic video visit system, to allow prisoners to maintain contact with their families.

In line with WHO guidance and following consultation with the NPHE, the Irish Prison Service introduced a basic health check, including taking of temperatures, for all persons entering prisons from 29 March. More recently, all prisoners newly committed to prison are being quarantined for up to 14 days, in order to reduce the risk that a new committal who might be incubating the virus could spread Covid-19 to the general prison population.

The Irish Prison Service is taking a proactive approach to ensure the early detection of any possible case of Covid-19. I am informed that any prisoner who advises staff that they are experiencing symptoms of Covid-19 is immediately assessed by prison healthcare staff who, following the guidance provided by the NPHE and the HSE and public health authorities, arrange for the prisoner to be isolated and tested, if they meet specific criteria. Some prisoners who do not meet the HSE threshold for Covid-19 testing but are experiencing some symptoms continue to be isolated in line with HSE advice.

I am further advised that the Irish Prison Service has opened a specific unit in Cloverhill to allow for the isolation of any confirmed case. This unit is currently being used to accommodate symptomatic prisoners who are suspected of having Covid-19. Prisoners continue to be isolated in this unit until cleared from isolation through the Covid-19 testing process. Staff working in this unit wear appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to ensure their health and safety.

All prisoners aged 70 years or more or those that are deemed medically vulnerable are being "cocooned", so as to minimise all interactions with other prisoners or staff and to ensure their health and safety. This approach is in line with Government advice to members of the public.

I am informed that, in order to prevent cross-contamination in our prisons, some further restrictions have also been put in place for prisoners and staff within our prisons. Certain activities, such as work and training, have been curtailed to reduce cross-prison movements and interactions, and the prison schools have been closed. I am also informed that prison staff must remain in the areas that they are specifically assigned for duty.

Managing the response to Covid-19 has seen enormous change for both prisoners and staff. To enable effective implementation of these changes, a communications campaign has been rolled out by the Irish Prison Service: regular Covid-19 Information Leaflets for prisoners, developed by the prison Red Cross Prisoner Volunteers, and Covid-19 information newsletters for staff are being published and distributed to raise awareness of the particular risks the virus poses in a prison environment and to provide updates on the necessary actions being taken by the Service to keep staff, prisoners and their families' safe.

Due to the contingency measures introduced, the ongoing dedicated work of Irish Prison Service staff and with the cooperation and understanding of the prisoners themselves, as of 16 April 2020, there has been no confirmed prisoner case of Covid-19 within the Irish prison system. I am grateful to all concerned for their continuing work and I am sure the Deputy would join me in paying tribute to the courage of the frontline staff involved.

Question

249. To ask the Minister for Justice for a reply to (details supplied) which relates to the Direct Provision centre in Sligo and reps we made to you last week under Minister's Reference: DJE-MO-01434-2020 -- Frank Feighan TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I thank the Deputy for his question and I can confirm that a response was issued to you by my Department on 30 March 2020 in relation to your correspondence (reference DJE-MO-01434-2020) and issues regarding the accommodation centre in Sligo.

At all times, the Department has worked closely with the HSE at national and local level and moved at speed to put in place arrangements for the 7,700 international protection applicants who have opted to avail of state services while their applications are being processed. It was essential to tackle the challenges in a comprehensive and consistent way, in consultation with the HSE. Department personnel have worked intensively to make arrangements right across the State to deal with this unprecedented challenge and that work is continuing.

Department staff are in daily contact with each centre manager across the network of Direct Provision centres. All our centre managers are working closely with the Department, the HSE and residents on a daily basis to ensure that centres are safe and that guidelines on social distancing are observed.

My Department takes any complaints from residents very seriously and all residents are made fully aware of their ability to contact the Department at any time in confidence to raise any queries or concerns. Residents can also avail of the services of the Ombudsman or the Ombudsman for Children, as appropriate.

We have spoken with management from the accommodation centre in Sligo who have assured us that they are fully committed to supporting their residents through this difficult time. The service provider operating this centre is one of our most experienced with twenty years' experience providing accommodation and supports for international protection applicants.

Generally speaking, we understand that this is a stressful and worrying time for everyone, and we want to again assure our centre residents that their safety and wellbeing is our priority.

Staff in the Department have been working tirelessly since February to secure additional accommodation for our residents. Over the last two weeks we have announced that 850 new temporary beds have been procured following intensive negotiations by the Department within a very short space of time.

The new beds are being used in a number of ways including:

1. to support the measures required for vulnerable residents;
2. to provide offsite accommodation for self-isolation, and
3. to help with social distancing measures by reducing overall numbers in some existing centres.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents. The majority of the 850 beds are being used to support social distancing by reducing the number of residents in existing communal centres. In consultation with the HSE, a large number of transfers of residents to this new accommodation were completed early last week, and further transfers will continue. To protect the privacy of residents, the Department does not provide information on individual transfer locations.

In our existing centres, including the centre in Sligo, the steps we have taken to implement social distancing means that there is now a maximum of 3 people (non-family members) sharing a room.

To further address the concerns outlined in your original correspondence regarding at risk groups such as the elderly, I can confirm that while HSE advice is that all persons aged 70 years or older should practice cocooning, we have already gone further than the HSE guidelines by implementing cocooning measures for all those aged 65 years or older in our centres. We have also cocooned all those identified to us by the HSE as having serious medical illnesses and this process is ongoing.

Question

317. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality if members of an Garda Síochána have occasion to enforce Section 31A(7) and Section 31A(9) of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 and if he will make a statement on the matter. -- Carol Nolan TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

New powers have been provided for members of An Garda Síochána under section 31A of the Health Act 1947, as inserted by the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020. As the Deputy is aware, the purpose of these powers is to protect public health during this dangerous pandemic.

However it is important to recognise that there has been a high level of compliance by the public with the guidance and temporary public health measures in place to inhibit the spread of Covid-19. The Garda Commissioner has confirmed that An Garda Síochána has adopted a graduated policing response to this issue, based on its tradition of policing by consent. I understand that Garda members engage, educate, encourage and only as a last resort, enforce.

In practical terms, this means that Gardaí engage with any person who appears to be contravening the guidance and explain why and how they should adjust their behaviour to reduce the risk to public safety and health. Use of the powers provided for in the Act and further detailed in the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions)(Covid-19) Regulations 2020 are therefore considered only where an individual, despite warnings, does not adhere to the guidelines.

The Deputy may be interested to know that a special Garda operation – Operation Fanacht – was conducted from Wednesday 8 April to Monday 13 April, involving approximately 650 checkpoints, as well as high visibility patrols at tourist locations.

As the Deputy may be aware I have requested the Commissioner to compile and publish a record of any use of these powers, with a view to ensuring transparency. Figures published by An Garda Síochána on the initial use of the new regulations over the Easter weekend show (figures correct as of 00.01, 14 April 2020) confirm that:

- In 7 cases, despite receiving a number of warnings, some individuals did not adhere to the guidelines and the regulations were used. As per Garda policy, in all cases where arrests were made under the regulations, Garda members will consult with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the decision to charge individuals.
- In addition, there were 144 COVID-19 related incidents that started as potential breaches of the regulations, but during the incidents other offences were disclosed. As such, long-standing legislation for offences such as public order, assault, road traffic, and drugs was used instead. This included incidents involving house parties, gatherings beyond the family unit, and non-essential travel.

The Deputy will be aware that the Minister for Health has by Regulation extended the emergency powers granted to Garda Members until 5 May 2020. I can confirm that An Garda Síochána will be providing further updates on the use of these powers on a weekly basis.

Question

414. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality what practical steps he has taken in terms of the personal insolvency and bankruptcy process in order to prepare it for an increased volume of cases caused by the COVID-19 outbreak and if he will make a statement on the matter --Michael McGrath TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

The Insolvency Service of Ireland (ISI) is an independent statutory body established under the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 to deal with all matters relating to personal insolvency following the last recession.

I can assure the Deputy that the ISI is well equipped to deal with any increase in the volume of applications for the insolvency arrangements available under the 2012 Act as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure the continued provision of its services in the current situation, the ISI has rolled out streamlined procedures both internally and in conjunction with the judiciary and the Courts Service, with whom agreement has been reached on the relaxation of certain procedures to facilitate carrying them out remotely. The office of the ISI remains open, with limited staff attending for essential duties while others work from home. The helpline function has been adapted so that customers can contact the ISI on dedicated mobile numbers or alternatively, by freetext and email.

The established network of experienced Personal Insolvency Practitioners authorised by the ISI under the 2012 Act is already well placed to assist those people who may find themselves in financial difficulty as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, an agreement in principle has been facilitated between Personal Insolvency Practitioners and Banking and Payments Federation Ireland on payment breaks in certain insolvency arrangements.

Those who may find themselves in mortgage arrears and insolvent as a result of the pandemic may also be eligible for free financial and legal advice under the Abhaile scheme.

My Department has completed extensive work on the review of Part 3 of the Personal Insolvency Acts 2012-2015, following the public consultation already held under section 141 of those Acts. In the course of the public consultation, a range of detailed submissions was received. These have been carefully analysed, a number of follow-up discussions have been held with the stakeholders concerned, and all proposals made, along with any further changes needed to legislation in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, will be considered as part of the review.

Question

1014. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the additional supports and funding in place for providers of domestic and gender-based violence and abuse during the public health emergency. --
Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I fully appreciate the seriousness of domestic abuse and I can reassure the Deputy that combatting domestic abuse is an important aspect of the National Strategy for Women and Girls and the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence.

I am conscious too of the added fear and risk of domestic abuse which some people face, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions. In recognition of this, my Department has developed an inter-agency plan to address domestic abuse during this period. We are also leading a public awareness campaign on domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis, in partnership with victim support services in the community and voluntary sector. I can also assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána continue to attach the highest priority to domestic abuse incidents.

The Deputy requested information in particular on funding. Primarily responsibility for funding frontline services such as refuges and Rape Crisis Centres rests with Tusla and details of the funding provided can be obtained from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Insofar as my Department is concerned, and in addition to the funding already allocated for 2020, I can confirm that my Department is providing the following additional funding to organisations in the sector, to support and extend the existing services they offer primarily in support for victims of crime in relation to their interaction with the criminal justice system:

- Women's Aid: €63,000 for additional resources to extend the Support and Referral Service and the High Risk Support project;
- Rape Crisis Centre Network Ireland: €50,000 to support the work of local centres in relation to the provision of a confidential, data compliant service, and to manage information flows on advice and guidance to and from front line trauma support workers;
- Ruhama: €8,000 for additional support packs for women seeking to exit prostitution;
- Men's Development Network: up to €39,340 for an extension of the Male Advice line, extra telephone support for the Men Ending Domestic Violence programme, and to deliver a promotional campaign; and
- Safe Ireland: €36,000 for additional personnel capacity and communicating with their service users.

This brings the current total additional funding from the Department to more than €196,000.

It is important to be clear that this funding provided by my Department is additional to the significant funding provided by Tusla, amounting to €25.3m in 2020.

The Deputy may also be interested to hear of the range of actions which have been taken to ensure that domestic abuse remains a priority and that all State and community and voluntary sector supports remain fully available to victims during the Covid-19 crisis.

The goal of our action is to ensure that support services remain fully available to victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and that they continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system in this period.

- An Garda Síochána has established 'Operation Faoisimh', a proactive initiative designed to ensure victims of domestic abuse are supported and protected throughout this period. Under the initiative, domestic abuse incidents will continue to receive the highest priority response from Gardaí. In addition, Gardaí are making calls to victims who have reported domestic abuse in the past.
- The Legal Aid Board is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every centre maintaining a phone line or email address for victims seeking supports. A Helpline has also been set up to ensure that persons experiencing domestic violence issues get prompt legal advice and legal representation in court where needed.
- The Courts Service is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every District continuing to have a Court open to hear applications for protection orders, interim barring orders and emergency barring orders.
- Tusla has put a range of practical supports in place including in relation to funding, identification of additional accommodation capacity, and provision of additional ICT resources.

As well as these added supports and services, I and my colleague Minister of State David Stanton have in recent days launched a public awareness campaign, involving TV and radio advertisements as well as social and other media, to carry a message to victims of domestic abuse that services are still available despite COVID-19. The campaign will similarly alert perpetrators to the fact that domestic abuse will continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system throughout this crisis.

This public awareness campaign is being conducted in partnership by State services and community and voluntary organisations in the sector. Further information on the organisations involved in this initiative as well as services and supports for victims is available on a new website www.stillhere.ie.

Question

1015. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality if he can confirm that the recent arrangements for District Court sittings will be discontinued during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the relocation of Tallaght District Court, Blanchardstown District Court (Courts 1 & 2), Swords District Court, Balbriggan District Court and Dun Laoghaire District Court to the Criminal Courts of Justice building in Dublin has caused dangerous overcrowding not conducive to social distancing during court sittings. --Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

Under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions. The distribution of the business of the Dublin Metropolitan District Court, which includes the scheduling of business in the suburban Courts, is a matter for the President of the District Court who is independent in the exercise of his judicial functions.

In order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made with the Courts Service and am informed that there have been consultations with stakeholders about the COVID-19 related changes in health and safety arrangements in place in the Criminal Courts of Justice (CCJ), both before and after their introduction. These consultations have continued as a means to explore additional measures as issues arise. Given that the Covid 19 is ongoing and the Courts Service are satisfied that the procedures introduced are working, there are no plans to revisit this policy at this time.

It is of course also important that all officers of and persons attending the Courts take personal responsibility for ensuring a safe working environment for all. Measures have been introduced to encourage social distancing through both Judicial practice directions and practices or changes introduced by the Courts Service. The measures in respect of the District Court include:

- No requirements for bailed defendants to appear;
- Block adjournment of lists introduced with dates emailed to solicitors and posted in various places in the Criminal Court of Justice;
- The custody list produced and posted outside the courtrooms;
- One solicitor at a time being dealt with in courtrooms;
- The jury assembly area open and available to be used as a waiting area;
- Judges sitting earlier to hear informations/requests for warrants;
- Sittings at 2.30pm and 4.30pm in addition to the morning sitting to prevent the build-up of cases for the evening Court;
- Floor markers to indicate the required distance while queuing for Court and the Bail office;
- Jury minders manning each Courtroom door to monitor numbers going in with a runner to call parties when required, and calling members of An Garda Síochána to court from the jury room waiting area as required;
- The PA system reminding users of the need to socially distance while conducting business in the Criminal Court of Justice;
- Hand sanitisers available: multiple wall-mounted units at various points in the Great Hall and jury assembly area; units also beside the cafe, outside the Public Office and outside the Bar Council Office;
- Additional cleaning of touch points carried out daily.

The Deputy will appreciate that there are certain frontline services that need to continue to be provided at this time. The holding of courts is one such essential service and the Courts Service has been working with members of the Judiciary to continue to provide court services, for the issues of

highest priority. The Chief Justice, the President of the Court of Appeal, the President of the High Court, the President of the Circuit Court and the President of the District Court have established special measures for the conduct of business at this time. In supporting these, the Courts Service has introduced a broad range of measures to significantly scale back the numbers of cases coming before the courts, while preserving essential access to the administration of justice. In addition, steps have been taken to use videolink and other technologies to the greatest extent possible as well as aiming to protect all of the people attending the courts by ensuring social distancing as well as promoting hand hygiene while on the premises.

More broadly, my Department has established a cross-functional COVID-19 response team comprising senior officials from within the department and the key agencies including the Courts Service. This team, in turn, inputs to national structures established to manage the risk of COVID-19. Its focus is to put in place a coordinated approach to COVID-19 response and the inter-agency working taking place is aimed at reducing the risk to anyone that comes into contact with the services as well as for the people working in the various agencies.

I appreciate that these are uncertain and challenging times for all of us but I hope this information has been of some assistance.

Question

1016. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality given that Homecare workers are more critical than ever as our country faces the challenges of COVID 19; Are there any plans to regularise the status of undocumented homecare workers in the state? --Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

My Department examines each case of undocumented or illegal persons in the State on a case by case basis and we have consistently urged anyone in this position to come forward if they wish to apply to regularise their position. A pragmatic approach is taken in relation to each case, which is considered on its individual merits. We, along with other Member States of the European Union, have committed, under the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum (2008), to a case-by-case approach as opposed to mass regularisation.

A detailed Frequently Asked Questions document is available on the Immigration Service Delivery website ("[http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ-2\[1\].pdf/Files/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ-2\[1\].pdf](http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ-2[1].pdf/Files/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ-2[1].pdf)), which clarifies many issues relating to visas, stamps, immigration, etc. during the COVID-19 pandemic. This document is updated regularly.

While not classed as undocumented persons, the Deputy may also wish to be updated on the situation of those healthcare workers who are living in our Direct Provision accommodation centres. My Department is guided by public health experts in managing all challenges associated with the virus in communal settings, including that of care workers in our centres, who are providing an important service as part of the national response to COVID-19.

Last week (10 April), the HSE issued its National Guidance Document on Temporary Accommodation for Healthcare Workers during the COVID-19 crisis. Healthcare workers living in Direct Provision are eligible to apply for accommodation under the scheme via a referral form to the HSE. We are encouraging all healthcare workers living in our centres to apply for this temporary accommodation for their protection and that of other centre residents and staff. We have also asked the NGO community to support this initiative and to help to bring it to the attention of residents through their support networks.

Question

603. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality can he confirm whether people who are being cocooned within the prison system are still getting at least one hour of exercise every day and getting at least two hours of meaningful human contact? --Roderic O'Gorman TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

As the Deputy will appreciate, Covid-19 presents unique challenges to custodial institutions, including our prisons. Covid-19 in a prison setting would present significant challenges for prison management in terms of controlling the spread of the virus amongst staff and prisoners, and the provision of appropriate medical treatment to affected persons.

A significant amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service to plan and implement a wide range of actions aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19 to our prisons. The actions taken by the Irish Prison Service are consistent with advice from both the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and guidance from the WHO on the management of Covid-19 in a prison setting.

I am further advised by the Irish Prison Service that, in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Health Service Executive, they have made the necessary operational arrangements throughout the prison estate to put measures in place to protect the prisoner population most at risk during the Covid-19 crisis.

In that context, cocooning is a measure to protect prisoners who are either over 70 years of age or medically vulnerable so as to minimise all interactions between them and other prisoners or staff. I am informed that the prisoner population who require to be cocooned include the following;

- Prisoners 70 years of age or more; or
- Prisoners with medical conditions who the health care team identify as vulnerable. This includes:
 1. Prisoners with cancer, for example those with leukaemia, on chemotherapy, on immunotherapy, on other specified treatments, or on immunosuppressants after transplants.
 2. Prisoners with severe respiratory disease – for example, severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma or cystic fibrosis (CF).
 3. Prisoners with Rare Diseases – for example, sickle cell anaemia.
 4. Pregnant women with cardiovascular disease.

I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that prison management continue to encourage exercise (excluding use of gym facilities) and leisure activity, ensuring that it is done separate to the general prisoner population. In addition, the Irish Prison Service has introduced an electronic video visit system to allow prisoners to maintain contact with their families. The number of television channels and national newspapers available to prisoners who are cocooning have also been increased.

Finally, I am advised that prisoners who are asymptomatic and are currently cocooned within prisons are being facilitated with their statutory out-of-cell time, except in limited circumstances where a prisoner cannot avail of exercise for medical reasons.

Question

602. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality, what additional measures his Department have put in place to support victims of domestic abuse during the Covid-19 restrictions and will his Department be providing any additional funding to service providers during the current crisis? --Roderic O'Gorman TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I fully appreciate the seriousness of domestic abuse and I can reassure the Deputy that combatting domestic abuse is an important aspect of the National Strategy for Women and Girls and the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence.

I am conscious too of the added fear and risk of domestic abuse which some people face, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions. In recognition of this, my Department has developed an inter-agency plan to address domestic abuse during this period. We are also leading a public awareness campaign on domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis, in partnership with victim support services in the community and voluntary sector. I can also assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána continue to attach the highest priority to domestic abuse incidents.

The Deputy requested information in particular on funding. Primarily responsibility for funding frontline services such as refuges and Rape Crisis Centres rests with Tusla and details of the funding provided can be obtained from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Insofar as my Department is concerned, and in addition to the funding already allocated for 2020, I can confirm that my Department is providing the following additional funding to organisations in the sector, to support and extend the existing services they offer primarily in support for victims of crime in relation to their interaction with the criminal justice system:

- Women's Aid: €63,000 for additional resources to extend the Support and Referral Service and the High Risk Support project;
- Rape Crisis Centre Network Ireland: €50,000 to support the work of local centres in relation to the provision of a confidential, data compliant service, and to manage information flows on advice and guidance to and from front line trauma support workers;
- Ruhama: €8,000 for additional support packs for women seeking to exit prostitution;
- Men's Development Network: up to €39,340 for an extension of the Male Advice line, extra telephone support for the Men Ending Domestic Violence programme, and to deliver a promotional campaign; and
- Safe Ireland: €36,000 for additional personnel capacity and communicating with their service users.

This brings the current total additional funding from the Department to more than €196,000.

It is important to be clear that this funding provided by my Department is additional to the significant funding provided by Tusla, amounting to €25.3m in 2020.

The Deputy may also be interested to hear of the range of actions which have been taken to ensure that domestic abuse remains a priority and that all State and community and voluntary sector supports remain fully available to victims during the Covid-19 crisis.

The goal of our action is to ensure that support services remain fully available to victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and that they continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system in this period.

- An Garda Síochána has established 'Operation Faoisimh', a proactive initiative designed to ensure victims of domestic abuse are supported and protected throughout this period. Under the initiative, domestic abuse incidents will continue to receive the highest priority response from Gardaí. In addition, Gardaí are making calls to victims who have reported domestic abuse in the past.
- The Legal Aid Board is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every centre maintaining a phone line or email address for victims seeking supports. A Helpline has also been set up to ensure that persons experiencing domestic violence issues get prompt legal advice and legal representation in court where needed.
- The Courts Service is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every District continuing to have a Court open to hear applications for protection orders, interim barring orders and emergency barring orders.
- Tusla has put a range of practical supports in place including in relation to funding, identification of additional accommodation capacity, and provision of additional ICT resources.

As well as these added supports and services, I and my colleague Minister of State David Stanton have in recent days launched a public awareness campaign, involving TV and radio advertisements as well as social and other media, to carry a message to victims of domestic abuse that services are still available despite COVID-19. The campaign will similarly alert perpetrators to the fact that domestic abuse will continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system throughout this crisis.

This public awareness campaign is being conducted in partnership by State services and community and voluntary organisations in the sector. Further information on the organisations involved in this initiative as well as services and supports for victims is available on a new website www.stillhere.ie.

Question

604. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality how many Covid19 cases have been detected in total across the prison system among inmates and how many IPS staff members have contracted the virus?
--Roderic O'Gorman TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

As the Deputy will appreciate, Covid-19 presents unique challenges to custodial institutions, including our prisons. Covid-19 in a prison setting would present significant challenges for prison management in terms of controlling the spread of the virus amongst staff and prisoners, and the provision of appropriate medical treatment to affected persons.

A significant amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service to plan and implement a wide range of actions aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19 to our prisons. The actions taken by the Irish Prison Service are consistent with advice from both the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and guidance from the WHO on the management of Covid-19 in a prison setting.

While a very small number of staff have tested positive, due to the contingency measures introduced and the ongoing dedicated work by the staff of the Irish Prison Service, and with the work, cooperation and understanding from the prisoners themselves, I can confirm that, as of 16 April 2020, there has been no confirmed prisoner case of Covid-19 within the Irish prison system. I am grateful to all concerned for their continuing work and I am sure the Deputy would join me in paying tribute to the courage of the frontline staff involved.

It must be acknowledged that, given the nature of this virus, it remains possible that at some stage there will be a confirmed prisoner case. Should that occur, the decision to confirm and/or release details of a positive test for Covid-19 would be a matter for the Chief Medical Officer, the National Public Health Emergency Team and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

Question

606. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality what facilities exist to enable prisoners to contact prison visiting committees in confidence during the Covid19 crisis? --Roderic O'Gorman TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

A Visiting Committee is assigned to each of Ireland's 12 prisons and places of detention under the Prison (Visiting Committees) Act, 1925 and Prisons (Visiting Committees) Order, 1925. The function of visiting committees is to visit at frequent intervals the prison to which they are appointed and hear any complaints which may be made to them by any prisoner. In inspecting prisons, the committees generally focus on issues such as the quality of accommodation, catering, medical, educational, welfare and recreational facilities. In the normal course of events, the visiting committee have free access, either collectively or individually, to every part of their prison.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the current Covid-19 pandemic provides unique challenges to custodial institutions including our prisons and COVID-19 in a prison setting would present significant challenges for prison management in terms of controlling the spread of the virus amongst staff and prisoners, and the provision of appropriate medical treatment to affected persons.

A significant amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service to plan and implement a wide range of actions aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19 to our prisons. I understand that the Irish Prison Service continues to work closely with the Health Service Executive (HSE) in developing contingency plans specifically for the management of Covid-19 should it present in prisons, in line with best international practice, to reduce the risk of exposure to staff, prisoners, visitors and to people in the wider community.

It is important to say that Prison Visiting Committees are independent in the exercise of their functions. As such, it is for visiting committees to determine how best to exercise their statutory function in the current context, given the risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, in consultation with the Governors of their respective prisons and in light of the technical solutions which are being put in place by the Irish Prison Service.

I can however assure the Deputy that my Department and the Director General of the Irish Prison Service have been pro-active in contacting the Chairs of the Visiting Committees to provide information on the current situation, to encourage them to consider the options available. The Irish Prison Service has also assured the Visiting Committees that it continues to be fully supportive of their role and will extend whatever facilities are practicable to them, in order to ensure continuity of access despite the current restrictions.

The Inspector of Prisons has also been visiting prisons across the estate on a regular basis over the last number of weeks.

Question

609. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality what specific measures are being taken for persons who live in direct provision or emergency direct provision and who also work in the health or care sectors, and are therefore classified as vulnerable? --Roderic O'Gorman TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

We are guided by public health experts in managing all challenges associated with the virus in communal settings, including that of care workers in our centres, who are providing an important service as part of the national response to COVID-19.

Last Friday (10 April), the HSE issued its National Guidance Document on Temporary Accommodation for Healthcare Workers during the COVID-19 crisis. Healthcare workers living in Direct Provision are eligible to apply for accommodation under the scheme via a referral form to the HSE. We are encouraging all healthcare workers living in our centres to apply for this temporary accommodation for their protection and that of other centre residents and staff. We have also asked the NGO community to support this initiative and to help to bring it to the attention of residents through their support networks.

The HSE has been in working with the Irish Refugee Council to identify and contact those residents in our centres who are employed in:

- the HSE;
- community healthcare;
- Section 38 and 39 organisations including voluntary hospital staff;
- National Ambulance Service;
- private nursing homes, and,
- long-term disability and mental health residential facilities,

to inform them of the process of seeking alternative temporary accommodation during the COVID-19 response.

Temporary accommodation, close to their work, will be set up for healthcare workers affected by COVID-19 by the HSE. This will assist eligible healthcare workers to reduce interactions with others and prevent the spread of coronavirus in their residential settings and in the community. Accommodation is also available from the HSE to such workers if they require self-isolation. Self-isolation referrals are made to the HSE via a dedicated email address.

Information has been made available by my Department to all accommodation centre managers on the process for applying for temporary accommodation, eligibility criteria and the relevant contact details. We have also asked centre managers to leave printed copies of the application form at reception areas in centres and to post details of the process on the centre's notice board.

While the accommodation centre staff can provide the information, responsibility lies with the healthcare employee to avail of this measure. The employee must complete the form, and return it to their employer. Their employer, in turn, will send the form to the designated HSE Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) contact in the area.

Question

701. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality whether residents in Ireland whose permission to reside expired prior to 20 March 2020 but were unable to secure an appointment at the Garda National Immigration Bureau to renew their permission will receive the same two-month extension granted to residents whose permission expires between 20 March 2020 and 20 May 2020, and if he will make a statement on the matter? --Róisín Shortall TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I can advise the Deputy that the automatic extension of residence permissions, which I announced on 20 March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 crisis does not extend to permissions which had expired prior to that date. My Department will deal with such renewal applications on a case-by-case basis.

A Frequently Asked Questions document on the impact of COVID-19 on immigration and international protection is available on the homepage of the Immigration Service Delivery website (www.inis.gov.ie). This document is regularly updated.

Applicants may continue to contact the relevant Unit or Division via email (the relevant email addresses are available on the ISD website). In any email correspondence, the applicant should include their Person ID and Application Number, if known, so that their query can be identified with their case file.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the processing capacity of the Immigration Service Delivery function of the Department is likely to be reduced during the current emergency period.

Question

861. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality if his Department can provide clarification in regard to parental access, provided for under a court order, during the COVID-19 restrictions, where one parent is refused access to his or her children by the other parent, solely on the basis of the current COVID restrictions and will the Minister make a statement on the matter. --Marian Harkin TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I appreciate the concerns that the public health emergency is causing for many families in relation to court orders for matters such as access, maintenance and guardianship. I believe it is important to point out first and foremost however that court orders in relation to access remain in place. Everyone should understand that the restrictions brought in to tackle Covid-19 do not stop them being implemented, and should not be used as an excuse by either party. In particular, the Regulations made by the Minister for Health, which came into effect on Wednesday 8 April, recognise the right of a parent, guardian, or person having a right of access to a child to leave their home in order to give effect to arrangements for access by that person or for another parent, guardian or person having such right of access.

Clearly, however, during this time there may be instances where it is impossible for couples to adhere strictly to the terms of an Order, and the President of the District Court recently clarified that parents could come to mutually agreed arrangements for alternative contact, which could involve phone calls, or skype etc., such agreement being noted by email or text message.

It is also important to note that if parties cannot agree on an alternative arrangement, mediation services are still available and should be used. The Family Mediation Service of the Legal Aid Board is offering free telephone mediation and conflict coaching. More details about this service can be found at www.legalaidboard.ie, while other free parent support services which provide help and advice are available from <http://www.onefamily.ie> and www.treoir.ie.

In the current exceptional circumstances, while court offices are still open, they are only open for essential business, and by appointment only, and the Judiciary and the Courts Service have advised that applications for breach of access or maintenance are not generally considered to be urgent. However, according to the Practice Direction of the President of the District Court, a case which does not come into the defined urgent category can be treated as urgent if a good case can be made, and this will be decided, by the Court, on a case by case basis. The full details of the statement from the President of the District Court can be found on the website of the Courts Service at: <https://beta.courts.ie/news/president-district-court-family-law-statement>.

I hope this information is of some help to families and I would like to emphasise that I am appealing to everyone to remember at all times that the welfare of the child is paramount.

Question

862. To ask the Minister for Health if his Department or the HSE can provide clarification in regard to parental access, provided for under a court order during the COVID-19 restrictions, where one parent is refused access to his or her children by the other parent, solely on the basis of the current COVID restrictions and will the Minister make a statement on the matter? --Marian Harkin TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I appreciate the concerns that the public health emergency is causing for many families in relation to court orders for matters such as access, maintenance and guardianship. I believe it is important to point out first and foremost however that court orders in relation to access remain in place. Everyone should understand that the restrictions brought in to tackle Covid-19 do not stop them being implemented, and should not be used as an excuse by either party. In particular, the Regulations made by the Minister for Health, which came into effect on Wednesday 8 April, recognise the right of a parent, guardian, or person having a right of access to a child to leave their home in order to give effect to arrangements for access by that person or for another parent, guardian or person having such right of access.

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I hope this information is of some help to families and I would like to emphasise that I am appealing to everyone to remember at all times that the welfare of the child is paramount.

Question

733. To ask the Minister for Justice, what supports the Government is providing for those asylum seekers in hotel accommodation; if he is aware of concerns regarding the centre [details supplied] and if anything can be done to support the residents there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. Details: The Esplanade Hotel, Bray, Co. Wicklow: there are reports that only two available hand sanitizing stations are available for all residents and that the distribution of soap is patchy. There have been complaints of not enough food being provided to residents particularly for those too scared to leave the accommodation for fear of catching COVID-19. --Jennifer Whitmore TD

734. To ask the Minister for Justice, if PPE equipment will be provided to staff at Direct Provision centres and those providing hotel accommodation; if he will issue clear guidelines for workers at these centres on the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 [details supplied] and what measures will be put in place to ensure any resident who needs to can 'cocoon' and self-isolate effectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Jennifer Whitmore TD

735. To ask the Minister for Justice, if DP Centres are being checked on their compliance to HSE guidelines and that management at centres and at hotels are not in contradiction with those guidelines [details supplied]; and if he will make a statement on the matter. Details: People in DP have been given printed HSE guidelines that are in contradiction with the rules of the management of their hostels/hotels. It has been reported that this is the case at the Esplanade Hotel in Bray. --Jennifer Whitmore TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I propose to answer these questions together.

I can inform the Deputy that intensive work has been underway in the Department since the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that, to the best of our ability, we protect the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of our accommodation services.

In all measures we are taking, we are guided by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team. We are working in particular with the HSE National Social Inclusion team and following all its advice. Our centre managers are working closely with the Department, the HSE and residents to ensure that centres are safe and that guidelines on social distancing are observed. My Department has not been advised by the HSE or NPHET that the wearing of PPE is necessary for staff working in our accommodation centres. I understand that such equipment should be prioritised at this time for healthcare staff.

The assessment is that dedicated Direct Provision Centres are safer environments than emergency accommodation where the Department does not have sole use of the premises. We have therefore brought those emergency locations which have no other guests into the supported environment of dedicated centres where cross agency services to residents can more effectively be provided to both residents and managers of the accommodation. The premises referred to by the Deputy is one such centre.

Residents have been made aware of the need for social distancing, good hand hygiene and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Information and posters have been distributed to all centres and translations of public health information have also been provided.

Centre managers have been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. Each manager must ensure that their centre has adequate supplies of cleaning products, sanitiser, tissues and wipes. Hygiene products are

distributed to international protection applicants as required. My Department has procured a large volume of hand sanitiser for residents and staff across our network of centres and this has now been distributed by courier to all of our centres. A regular supply of hand sanitiser is in place and this will be distributed to centres as required.

In recent weeks, the Department has established four dedicated self-isolation facilities and opened additional temporary accommodation centres to support social distancing and the measures required for vulnerable residents, with a combined total of 850 new temporary bed spaces.

The self-isolation accommodation has a capacity of 299 rooms in dedicated facilities in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk. Residents staying in self-isolation facilities will have their own bedroom and their own bathroom. In addition we have partnered with the HSE and non-profit (Section 39) organisations to ensure that residents in the self-isolation centres can be cared for on-site by health and social care personnel. Offsite self-isolation means that we can support people who are suspected of having the virus or who have the virus but with mild symptoms away from their centre. Once they are fully recovered they can then return to their centre with no risk to any other resident.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents and is additional to the new accommodation centres which we have opened recently in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. To date this year, over 1,550 beds have been procured by the Department.

In consultation with the HSE, we have relocated around 600 of our residents to the new temporary accommodation over the last three weeks to support social distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. The new accommodation that we have procured means that we can ensure that no more than 3 single people are sharing a room (similar to a small sized family unit) in any of our centres during this public health crisis. The vast majority of the rooms in the new accommodation are twin rooms, accommodating two people. If any person is being accommodated in these locations based on an identified vulnerability (age or medical condition), they have their own bedroom and their own bathroom to facilitate their cocooning.

Cocooning measures are required for people who fall within one of the six criteria of serious medical illnesses published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on 26 March 2020. These are the specific criteria that are helping to determine who in our centres is considered vulnerable at this time. We have already gone further than the HSE guidelines by implementing cocooning measures for all those aged 65 years or older. We have also cocooned all those identified to us by the HSE as having serious medical illnesses and this process is ongoing.

All accommodation centres including emergency centres have completed contingency plans for COVID-19. These plans are actively reviewed by IPAS to promote shared learning and best practice across centres. The nine HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHO) regions assessed all centres where people are living in congregated settings to establish their state of readiness and provided appropriate advice to assist.

In addition, each centre has been asked to generate onsite self-isolation capacity for use by persons suspected to have the virus. Any COVID-19 suspected or confirmed case, outbreak or contacts are managed by Public Health which also advises on follow up actions, such as control measures including isolation.

To support social distancing and to reduce contacts in the centres, centres are currently closed to visitors. Centres without independent living arrangements (where applicants can cook for themselves and their families) have been asked to implement staggered meal times or to provide takeaway facilities where canteens have been temporarily closed.

Our website www.accommodationcentres.ie has been adapted to include a new section where public health information and trusted online information sources have been consolidated and we are encouraging all residents to visit the site. In partnership with the HSE and SafetyNet, we have also put

in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. This service will also be used to advise, support and work with those locations where vulnerable groups are present in respect of the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

I can assure the Deputy that we take complaints from residents very seriously and all residents are made fully aware of their ability to contact the Department at any time, in confidence, and they have been provided with the appropriate contact details. In addition, residents can also avail of the services of the Ombudsman or the Ombudsman for Children, as appropriate.

Question

1013. To ask the Minister for Justice & Equality since the Covid19 outbreak many English language students have found themselves in a very vulnerable situation as they have enrolled in english classes; paid deposits, and now cant get work as they cant get approved by GNIB as all appointments have been postponed; will the Minister grant an amnesty on all English Language students until the current issues around the covid19 pandemic have eased and the GNIB office is back functioning? --Mary Lou McDonald TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

For students who had not registered their permission and had not yet commenced their course of study, the leave to land permission granted at the airport will be extended in line with the published notices from Immigration Service Delivery on its website (www.inis.gov.ie). However, this will not entitle them to commence employment.

As soon as the current COVID 19 restrictions are lifted and the Registration Office reopens, priority will be given to those seeking to register for the first time. Those for first time registration who had appointments cancelled will have their appointments rescheduled automatically. Other appointments will be made available exclusively for other first time applicants.

It should be noted that all such students on their arrival in the State are required to have sufficient funds to support their stay in Ireland without recourse to public funds, or the reliance on casual employment. For non-visa required nationals access to a minimum of €3,000 at first registration must be available to support themselves and for visa required nationals it is a minimum of €7,000.

Students who currently hold a Stamp 2 permission are being extended in line with the current notice published on the Immigration Service Delivery website. A Stamp 2 permission allows the non EEA student to work 20 hours per week. However, as all schools and colleges have now closed due to the Covid-19 outbreak, in these circumstances, the non EEA student can work 40 hours per week. This is conditional on the student completing their course online if this service is provided by the school or college and represents a short term temporary measure.

Students who were in employment and have lost their employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic can apply to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Students will be required to demonstrate that they have been in employment, that their employment has been terminated because of COVID-19 and that they are experiencing financial hardship as a consequence. Receipt of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment will not constitute a breach of the conditions of the student's immigration permission.

Question

If self-isolation facilities for people living in the Direct Provision system will be opened for those residents in Co. Wicklow who need them; and if this will be extended to residents living in hotel accommodation. --Jennifer Whitmore TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I can inform the Deputy that intensive work has been underway in the Department since the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that, to the best of our ability, we protect the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of our accommodation services including those residing in hotels in Co. Wicklow.

The assessment is that dedicated Direct Provision Centres are safer environments than emergency accommodation where the Department does not have sole use of the premises. We have therefore brought those emergency locations, hotels and guest houses, which have no other guests into the supported environment of dedicated centres where cross agency services to residents can more effectively be provided to both residents and managers of the accommodation. Each centre has been asked to generate onsite self-isolation capacity for use by persons suspected to have the virus. Any COVID-19 suspected or confirmed case, outbreak or contacts are managed by Public Health which also advises on follow up actions, such as control measures including isolation.

In recent weeks, the Department has established four dedicated self-isolation facilities and opened additional temporary accommodation centres to support social distancing and the measures required for vulnerable residents, with a combined total of 850 new temporary bed spaces. The self-isolation accommodation has a capacity of 299 rooms in dedicated facilities in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk. Residents of all centres and emergency locations, including those in Co. Wicklow, may avail of these facilities based on medical need.

Residents staying in self-isolation facilities will have their own bedroom and their own bathroom. In addition we have partnered with the HSE and non-profit (Section 39) organisations to ensure that residents in the self-isolation centres can be cared for on-site by health and social care personnel. Offsite self-isolation means that we can support people who are suspected of having the virus or who have the virus but with mild symptoms away from their centre. Once they are fully recovered they can then return to their centre with no risk to any other resident.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents and is additional to the new accommodation centres which we have opened recently in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. To date this year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary new beds have been procured by the Department.

In consultation with the HSE, we have relocated around 600 of our residents to the new temporary accommodation over the last three weeks to support social distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. The new accommodation that we have procured means that we can ensure that no more than 3 single people are sharing a room (similar to a small sized family unit) in any of our centres during this public health crisis. The vast majority of the rooms in the new accommodation are twin rooms, accommodating two people. If any person is being accommodated in these locations based on an identified vulnerability (age or medical condition), they have their own bedroom and their own bathroom to facilitate their cocooning.

Cocooning measures are required for people who fall within one of the six criteria of serious medical illnesses published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on 26 March 2020. These are the specific criteria that are helping to determine who in our centres is considered vulnerable at this

time. We have already gone further than the HSE guidelines by implementing cocooning measures for all those aged 65 years or older. We have also cocooned all those identified to us by the HSE as having serious medical illnesses and this process is ongoing.

All accommodation centres including emergency centres have completed contingency plans for COVID-19. These plans are actively reviewed by IPAS to promote shared learning and best practice across centres. The nine HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHO) regions assessed all centres where people are living in congregated settings to establish their state of readiness and provided appropriate advice to assist.

Our website www.accommodationcentres.ie has been adapted to include a new section where public health information and trusted online information sources have been consolidated and we are encouraging all residents to visit the site. In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, we have also put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. This service will also be used to advise, support and work with those locations where vulnerable groups are present in respect of the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

In all measures we are taking, we are guided by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team. We are working in particular with the HSE National Social Inclusion team and following all its advice. Our centre managers are working closely with the Department, the HSE and residents to ensure that centres are safe and that guidelines on social distancing are observed to the greatest degree possible.

Question

30. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the steps he will take to support victims of domestic and gender-based violence who are at additional risk during the Covid-19 emergency restrictions; and, if he will make a statement on the matter --Holly Cairns TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I fully appreciate the seriousness of domestic abuse and I can reassure the Deputy that combatting domestic abuse is an important aspect of the National Strategy for Women and Girls and the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence.

I am conscious too of the added fear and risk of domestic abuse which some people face, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions. In recognition of this, my Department has developed an inter-agency plan to address domestic abuse during this period. We are also leading a public awareness campaign on domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis, in partnership with victim support services in the community and voluntary sector. I can also assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána continue to attach the highest priority to domestic abuse incidents.

The Deputy requested information in particular on funding. Primarily responsibility for funding frontline services such as refuges and Rape Crisis Centres rests with Tusla and details of the funding provided can be obtained from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Insofar as my Department is concerned, and in addition to the funding already allocated for 2020, I can confirm that my Department is providing the following additional funding to organisations in the sector, to support and extend the existing services they offer primarily in support for victims of crime in relation to their interaction with the criminal justice system:

- Women's Aid: €63,000 for additional resources to extend the Support and Referral Service and the High Risk Support project;
- Rape Crisis Centre Network Ireland: €50,000 to support the work of local centres in relation to the provision of a confidential, data compliant service, and to manage information flows on advice and guidance to and from front line trauma support workers;
- Ruhama: €8,000 for additional support packs for women seeking to exit prostitution;
- Men's Development Network: up to €39,340 for an extension of the Male Advice line, extra telephone support for the Men Ending Domestic Violence programme, and to deliver a promotional campaign; and
- Safe Ireland: €36,000 for additional personnel capacity and communicating with their service users.

This brings the current total additional funding from the Department to more than €196,000.

It is important to be clear that this funding provided by my Department is additional to the significant funding provided by Tusla, amounting to €25.3m in 2020.

The Deputy may also be interested to hear of the range of actions which have been taken to ensure that domestic abuse remains a priority and that all State and community and voluntary sector supports remain fully available to victims during the Covid-19 crisis.

The goal of our action is to ensure that support services remain fully available to victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and that they continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system in this period.

- An Garda Síochána has established 'Operation Faoisimh', a proactive initiative designed to ensure victims of domestic abuse are supported and protected throughout this period. Under the initiative, domestic abuse incidents will continue to receive the highest priority response from Gardaí. In addition, Gardaí are making calls to victims who have reported domestic abuse in the past.
- The Legal Aid Board is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every centre maintaining a phone line or email address for victims seeking supports. A Helpline has also been set up to ensure that persons experiencing domestic violence issues get prompt legal advice and legal representation in court where needed.
- •The Courts Service is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every District continuing to have a Court open to hear applications for protection orders, interim barring orders and emergency barring orders.
- •Tusla has put a range of practical supports in place including in relation to funding, identification of additional accommodation capacity, and provision of additional ICT resources.

As well as these added supports and services, I and my colleague Minister of State David Stanton have in recent days launched a public awareness campaign, involving TV and radio advertisements as well as social and other media, to carry a message to victims of domestic abuse that services are still available despite COVID-19. The campaign will similarly alert perpetrators to the fact that domestic abuse will continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system throughout this crisis.

This public awareness campaign is being conducted in partnership by State services and community and voluntary organisations in the sector. Further information on the organisations involved in this initiative as well as services and supports for victims is available on a new website www.stillhere.ie

Question

To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the measures being taken to isolate international protection applicants who belong to the 'extremely medically vulnerable from COVID-19' category and applicants who are essential workers in healthcare settings; and, if he will make a statement on the matter. --Holly Cairns TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I can inform the Deputy that intensive work has been underway in the Department since the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that, to the best of our ability, we protect the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of our accommodation services. In all measures we are taking, we are guided by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team. We are working in particular with the HSE National Social Inclusion team and following all its advice. Our centre managers are working closely with the Department, the HSE and residents to ensure that centres are safe and that guidelines on social distancing are observed.

On 9th April, Minister Flanagan and I announced new measures to support residents during the COVID crisis. We have procured 850 new temporary hotel beds to:

1. support the measures required for vulnerable residents;
2. provide offsite accommodation for self-isolation; and
3. help with social distancing measures by reducing overall numbers in some existing centres.

This increase in capacity is a critical part of our overall strategy to protect our residents and is additional to the new accommodation centres which we have opened recently in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. To date this year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary additional beds have been procured by the Department.

Cocooning measures are required for people who fall within one of the six criteria of serious medical illnesses published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on 26 March 2020. These are the specific criteria that are helping to determine who in our centres is considered vulnerable at this time. We have already gone further than the HSE guidelines by implementing cocooning measures for all those aged 65 years or older. We have also cocooned all those identified to us by the HSE as having serious medical illnesses and this process is ongoing.

With regard to healthcare workers who are resident in our centres, on 10th April, the HSE issued its National Guidance Document on Temporary Accommodation for Healthcare Workers during the COVID-19 crisis. Healthcare workers living in Direct Provision are eligible to apply for accommodation under the scheme via a referral form to the HSE. We are encouraging all healthcare workers living in our centres to apply for this temporary accommodation for their protection and that of other centre residents and staff. Information and referral forms have been made available in all our accommodation centres. We have also asked the NGO community to support this initiative and to help to bring it to the attention of residents through their support networks.

Our website- www.accommodationcentres.ie - has been adapted to include a new section where public health information and trusted online information sources have been consolidated and we are encouraging all residents to visit the site. The information in respect of temporary accommodation for healthcare workers is also available on this website.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, we have also put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. This service will also be used to advise,

support and work with those locations where vulnerable groups are present in respect of the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Question

124. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will ensure that adequate financial resources are provided to organisations and centres providing refuge and assistance for victims of domestic abuse and if he will make a statement on the matter. --Brendan Smith TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I fully appreciate the seriousness of domestic abuse and I can reassure the Deputy that combatting domestic abuse is an important aspect of the National Strategy for Women and Girls and the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence.

I am conscious too of the added fear and risk of domestic abuse which some people face, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions. In recognition of this, my Department has developed an inter-agency plan to address domestic abuse during this period. We are also leading a public awareness campaign on domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis, in partnership with victim support services in the community and voluntary sector. I can also assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána continue to attach the highest priority to domestic abuse incidents.

The Deputy requested information in particular on funding. Primarily responsibility for funding frontline services such as refuges and Rape Crisis Centres rests with Tusla and details of the funding provided can be obtained from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Insofar as my Department is concerned, and in addition to the funding already allocated for 2020, I can confirm that my Department is providing the following additional funding to organisations in the sector, to support and extend the existing services they offer primarily in support for victims of crime in relation to their interaction with the criminal justice system:

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- Safe Ireland: €36,000 for additional personnel capacity and communicating with their service users.

This brings the current total additional funding from the Department to more than €196,000.

It is important to be clear that this funding provided by my Department is additional to the significant funding provided by Tusla, amounting to €25.3m in 2020.

The Deputy may also be interested to hear of the range of actions which have been taken to ensure that domestic abuse remains a priority and that all State and community and voluntary sector supports remain fully available to victims during the Covid-19 crisis.

The goal of our action is to ensure that support services remain fully available to victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and that they continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system in this period.

- An Garda Síochána has established 'Operation Faoisimh', a proactive initiative designed to ensure victims of domestic abuse are supported and protected throughout this period. Under the initiative, domestic abuse incidents will continue to receive the highest priority response from Gardaí. In addition, Gardaí are making calls to victims who have reported domestic abuse in the past.
- The Legal Aid Board is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every centre maintaining a phone line or email address for victims seeking supports. A Helpline has also been set up to ensure that persons experiencing domestic violence issues get prompt legal advice and legal representation in court where needed.
- The Courts Service is giving priority to domestic violence and childcare cases, with every District continuing to have a Court open to hear applications for protection orders, interim barring orders and emergency barring orders.
- Tusla has put a range of practical supports in place including in relation to funding, identification of additional accommodation capacity, and provision of additional ICT resources.

As well as these added supports and services, I and my colleague Minister of State David Stanton have in recent days launched a public awareness campaign, involving TV and radio advertisements as well as social and other media, to carry a message to victims of domestic abuse that services are still available despite COVID-19. The campaign will similarly alert perpetrators to the fact that domestic abuse will continue to receive the highest priority from the civil and criminal justice system throughout this crisis.

This public awareness campaign is being conducted in partnership by State services and community and voluntary organisations in the sector. Further information on the organisations involved in this initiative as well as services and supports for victims is available on a new website www.stillhere.ie.

Question

108. If legislation to protect commercial lease holders will be introduced to make it mandatory for any mortgage holiday or write offs to be passed on to the lease holder. --Jennifer Whitmore TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government has introduced a broad range of measures to respond to the needs of businesses experiencing difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The business supports made available by Government to address the COVID-19 emergency are designed to provide relief and support to businesses, including commercial leaseholders.

This area of the law is very complex and regard must be had to the fact that there is a multiplicity of contractual arrangements in play which reflect the diversity of the landlord and tenant relationship in the commercial sphere. It would therefore be extremely complex to seek to tackle this issue by way of amending landlord and tenant legislation.

I would of course express the wish that all parties to commercial leases show forbearance and understanding during this very difficult time.

Question

269. To ask the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government what steps he has taken to ensure the solvency and liquidity of residential owners' management companies of apartments and multi-unit developments during the COVID-19 emergency; will he authorise owners' management companies to borrow money to fund specific projects in line with recommendation 10 of the report of the Housing Agency and Clúid Housing, Owners' Management Companies Sustainable Apartment Living for Ireland (2019); and will he make a statement on the matter? --Cian O'Callaghan TD

270. To ask the Minister for Finance what steps he has taken to ensure the solvency and liquidity of residential owners' management companies of apartments and multi-unit developments during the COVID-19 emergency; will he create a state-supported interest-free working capital credit facility for such companies to ensure that they can continue to pay for vital fire safety equipment, waste collection, and insurance during the emergency period; and will he make a statement on the matter? --Cian O'Callaghan TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I propose to respond to these questions together.

The position is that the Multi-Unit Developments Act 2011 was enacted with the primary purpose of reforming the law relating to the ownership and management of common areas of multi-unit developments (MUDs) and facilitating the fair, efficient and effective management of owners' management companies (OMCs). Its primary focus is, therefore, on clarifying ownership of the common areas, both internal and external, and the mechanisms for managing and maintaining them. It does not deal with matters relating to the solvency or liquidity of OMCs, which are established and operate under relevant company law requirements, or the borrowing powers of such companies. Questions regarding the latter should be directed to the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

I should add that the Housing Agency, which operates under the aegis of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, has published useful information and guidance on managing apartments and MUDs, and managing the finances of OMCs, in the context of the current Covid 19 emergency on its website www.housingagency.ie

Question

653. Why are people still allowed to travel from Italy and other affected countries travelling via England and into Ireland without being stopped or quarantined. These people could be spreading the virus to our local areas and it is a concern for many. Many people over 70 would like to be able to go to their local shop, wearing a mask, and are prevented from doing so. This is impacting on their well-being and mental state. --Danny Healy-Rae TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

Measures in respect of international travel are kept under review on an ongoing basis and the Deputy will be aware that the Taoiseach has stated that this matter will be considered by the Cabinet Committee on COVID-19 on Monday, 20th April. While the Department of Justice and Equality is responsible for the implementation of national and EU decisions with respect to freedom of movement, the question of whether borders remain open under the current circumstances is a public health matter. The Department of Health is the lead Government Department in relation to public health matters, including COVID-19.

As the Deputy will appreciate, on the current recommendation of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), anyone arriving in the state, other than from Northern Ireland, is informed of the need to comply with the Department of Health guidelines with regard to COVID-19 and to restrict their movements for 14 days. This also applies to Irish residents. Essential supply chain services such as hauliers, pilots and maritime staff are exempt.

As the Deputy will be aware, data on passenger arrivals into Ireland shows that the numbers arriving have reduced dramatically following the adoption of public health measures. For example, the number of passengers arriving daily into Dublin Airport is currently down over 99% when compared with inward traffic volumes for the same dates in 2019. The overwhelming majority of passengers who continue to travel to Ireland are either Irish citizens, people who are resident in Ireland or residents of Northern Ireland.

I understand that the Taoiseach has requested that a review of matters take place this weekend in advance of Monday's meeting of the Cabinet Committee on COVID-19.

Question

605. To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality how much the prison population has been reduced since 2nd March 2020 and what further reduction in the prison population does he plan as a response to the Covid19 crisis? --Roderic O'Gorman TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

As the Deputy will appreciate, Covid-19 presents unique challenges to custodial institutions, including our prisons. Covid-19 in a prison setting would present significant challenges for prison management in terms of controlling the spread of the virus amongst staff and prisoners, and the provision of appropriate medical treatment to affected persons.

A significant amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service to plan and implement a wide range of actions aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19 to our prisons. The actions taken by the Irish Prison Service are consistent with advice from both the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and guidance from the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the management of Covid-19 in a prison setting.

I understand that the Irish Prison Service continues to work closely with the Health Service Executive (HSE) in developing contingency plans specifically for the management of Covid-19 should it present in prisons, in line with best international practice, to reduce the risk of exposure to staff, prisoners, visitors and to people in the wider community.

In this context, I approved a number of actions to reduce overcrowding in our prisons in March this year. This included the granting of temporary release to lower risk prisoners, who were assessed on a case-by-case basis. These measures were aimed at achieving a reduction of the number of people in custody in our prisons sufficiently to allow for an effective infection control regime, including physical distancing, to the greatest extent possible. Risks assessed included any convictions for domestic abuse, such as breach of barring orders which present significant risks at the present time.

I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that they have implemented a gradual and planned reduction of the prison population through the granting of temporary release to approximately 460 prisoners over the past 5 weeks.

It is important to recognise that the size of the prison population changes on a daily basis, as new committals are made and releases occur. In that regard, the Deputy may find it useful to note that the Irish Prison Service collates daily data, on a prison-by-prison basis, on the prisoner population. This information is published on the website of the Irish Prison Service website, at the following link: <https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/2015-daily-prisoner-population/>

I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that the prison population has reduced from 4,197 on 2 March, 2020 to 3,834 on 16 April 2020. This represents a reduction of 363, or almost 9% of the prison population as it was on 2 March. It is worth noting that numbers in custody reached their highest level on 11 March when there were a total of 4235 in custody.

I have also approved the granting of further temporary release to suitable prisoners in the event of particular strains on numbers or an outbreak of Covid-19 in a prison. This is subject to approval on a case-by-case basis, utilising the existing criteria for temporary release. As with all decisions regarding the granting of temporary release of a prisoner, an assessment of the potential risk posed to the public will be paramount in the decision-making process. The numbers continue to be kept under review on a daily basis.

Question

438. Can you advise if all visitors (non essential workers) coming into Ireland via our ports being asked to self-isolate for 14 days including those from the UK? I believe this is in line with the Dept of Foreign Affairs guidance. What is the current procedure for this in Dublin Port? --Jack Chambers TD

Answer

As the Deputy will appreciate, on the recommendation of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), anyone arriving in the state, other than from Northern Ireland, is informed of the need to comply with the Department of Health guidelines with regard to COVID-19 and to restrict their movements for 14 days. This also applies to Irish residents. Essential supply chain services such as hauliers, pilots and maritime staff are exempt.

As the Deputy will be aware, data on passenger arrivals into Ireland shows that the numbers arriving have reduced dramatically following the adoption of public health measures. For example, the number of passengers arriving daily into Dublin Airport is currently down over 99% when compared with inward traffic volumes for the same dates in 2019. The overwhelming majority of passengers who continue to travel to Ireland are either Irish citizens, people who are resident in Ireland or residents of Northern Ireland.

An Garda Síochána is responsible for immigration controls at ports of entry, with the exception of Dublin Airport where this responsibility rests with the Border Management Unit of the Immigration Service in my Department.

In Dublin airport, communication to persons arriving in the State has been managed to date by HSE officers. These arrangements have been under constant review, with the staff of the Border Management Unit taking responsibility for this work in the airport from tomorrow, Saturday 18 April 2020. This initiative along with the support of An Garda Síochána at other ports will support the HSE during this challenging time.

In relation to Dublin Port, as referred to by the Deputy, I understand that Garda members are fulfilling this function in relation to travel restrictions in place in this jurisdiction on landing. I understand from the Garda authorities that one Inspector, three Sergeants and 26 Gardai are currently assigned to immigration duty and security checks at Dublin Port. Of course An Garda Síochána works closely with Dublin Port Authority and Customs and Excise at Dublin Port as is also the case in Rosslare Europort.

I understand that the Taoiseach has requested that a review of matters take place this weekend in advance of Monday's meeting of the Cabinet Committee on COVID-19.