

Oireachtas COVID-19 Queries for answer by 27 April 2020

Question

3.58 - To: the Minister for Justice and Equality

I write on behalf of residents of the above and New Horizon, the support group involved with residents.

While I am aware that new proposals have been implemented in recent days in relation to making Direct Provision centres safer, there are still concerns as of today (Wednesday March 15) the sites are still dangerous and hazardous for those who live in them.

I have received reports from Temple that a 'thinning-out' of numbers has not been effective, people are being moved to shared accommodation and rooms are not being left empty etc.

The biggest worry they have is that self-isolating and healthy residents have to continue to share the same cooking and laundry facilities.

Can this matter be investigated please?

--Peter Burke TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I can inform the Deputy that the Temple Accommodation Centre has a contracted capacity of 125 bed spaces. As of 22 April 2020, there were 79 people accommodated in the Centre.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department and the HSE have worked closely together to support the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of the State's accommodation services.

Together, we have put in place a range of measures in all of the Department's Accommodation Centres to address any cases of COVID-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for self-isolation facilities in Centres and a number of offsite self-isolation Centres around the State. In all matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health advice from the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team is followed.

The established procedure across all Centres (including Temple Accommodation Centre) where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of quarantine until such time as the HSE considers that they can return to their centre with no risk to other residents or staff.

Residents in the centre 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. 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 advice also includes UNHCR and WHO information in respect of safe practices for observing the month of Ramadan.

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.

My Department has procured a large volume of hand sanitiser for our network of centres, which is being distributed as required.

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.

Specific arrangements have also been put in place in the Temple Accommodation Centre to support social distancing when using the laundry room or the communal kitchen. No more than two people are currently allowed to access the laundry room at the same time and the eight separate cooking stations can only be used by one person at a time.

To further support social and physical distancing and to reduce contacts in the centres, all centres including the Temple Accommodation Centre are currently closed to visitors.

Question

3.79. How much access do students in Direct Provision have to internet and technology to facilitate distance learning while the schools are closed?

Amnesty End Direct Provision Activist Group shared the results of a survey of 112 respondents from 31 centres and they are as follows:

(1) 10 direct provision centres have no access to wifi, or have limited access in reception areas/manager's offices, they are as follows:

- Kinsale Road Accommodation Centre, Cork
- Mosney, Meath
- The East End Hotel, Portarlinton, Laois
- Treacy's Hotel, Carrickmacross, Monaghan
- Athlone Accommodation Centre, Westmeath
- Drishane Castle, Millstreet, Cork
- Riverside Park Hotel, Macroom, Cork
- Knockalisheen, Clare
- Esplanade Hotel, Wicklow
- Temple Lodge, Moate, Westmeath

(2) Access to Laptops/Printer Facilities

A large proportion of the 112 residents surveyed have no access to laptops or printers either for themselves or within their family.

- 58.9% have no access to laptops
- 56.3% have no access to printer facilities

(3) Education Level

The below shows a breakdown of the educational requirements of respondents and their family members.

- 35.7% are attending Primary School
- 25.9% are attending Secondary School
- 79.5% are enrolled in University/higher education

--Cian O'Callaghan TD

3.274 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality when the following Direct Provision centres (Details supplied) will be provided with full internet access in light on the Covid-19 virus and educational needs of younger residents. - Mary Lou McDonald TD (SF) a)

Details supplied – b) Kinsale Road Accommodation Centre, Cork c) Mosney, Meath d) The East End Hotel, Portarlinton, Laois e) Treacy's Hotel, Carrickmacross, Monaghan f) Athlone Accommodation Centre, Westmeath g) Drishane Castle, Millstreet, Cork h) Riverside Park Hotel, Macroom, Cork i) Knockalisheen, Clare j) Esplanade Hotel, Wicklow k) Temple Lodge, Moate, Westmeath

3.275 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality the additional funding he has provided to Direct Provision centres since the outbreak of Covid-19 for the provision of computers and/or laptops for junior, second and third level child residents to complete their school and college work during the public health movement restrictions and the closures of school and colleges. - Mary Lou McDonald TD

3.280 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality how he intends to facilitate Leaving Certificate students living in direct provision accommodation to continue their studies for the planned exams where many of them have no wifi, no laptops and no printers and if he is aware that this is a violation of the constitutional right to equality in education and if he will make a statement on the matter - Martin Kenny TD

3.637 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality and Education and Skills if additional resources will be made available to students living in direct provision centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter.- Pádraig O'Sullivan TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I am proposing to answer questions 3.79, 3.274, 3.275, 3.280 and 3.637 together.

Since the announcement that schools would close and the extension of that closure, the Department of Education and Skills has written to school management and asked schools to put in place arrangements to continue the delivery of education to students.

A series of guidance notes to support schools in how to effectively support and engage with their students continues to be compiled by that Department to address challenges in providing programmes of continued learning in the current context. The guidelines aim to address parental feedback about a lack of engagement by some schools, especially at primary level, while the most recently published guidelines relate to disadvantage and children with special educational needs.

The Department of Education and Skills has also worked with the National Parents Council - Primary on a survey of parents to ascertain their views on school closures. The survey includes a focus on wellbeing. The nature of that work has primarily shifted to a model based on digital and remote teaching. That Department is aware of many schools that have used e-platforms to enable their teachers to provide work to students, particularly to students in examination classes, and to enable students to complete tasks and tests for assessment.

My colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills, has recently announced €50m in ICT funding for schools. This includes €40m for the ICT annual grant to eligible schools which provides for schools to buy equipment for use by students and teachers in developing digital technology approaches to teaching and learning. A further €10m in the form of top-up funding is being made available now to all primary and post-primary schools to assist schools further in the purchase of devices for students and teachers to support continuity of learning during the current school closures due to COVID-19. A total of €7million additional funding will be provided in the post-primary sector and €3m in the primary sector. DEIS schools will be allocated an additional 10% relative to non-DEIS schools to support their students to engage with online learning and educational resources. Schools have been asked to use this funding to address situations where students are disadvantaged in their engagement with the schools remote teaching and learning due to lack of access to digital devices. The devices will remain the property of the schools and loaned to the student to assist them in their studies. A circular to schools providing the details governing the funding for the grant and the top-up funding has recently issued.

I can also inform the Deputy that all international protection accommodation centres in my Department are contractually obliged to have Wi-Fi available to residents and TVs are provided in all bedrooms. This enables children to also access educational programmes such as the RTE Home School Hub, which is an additional support for parents and primary school pupils. Pupils are able to watch, download and engage with curriculum-based content, project work, and fun activities to keep them entertained and learning. This broadcast is a supplement to the ongoing learning being

provided by teachers. The Department is currently carrying out an examination of the level of WiFi access across our network of centres.

The Department of Education and Skills is also supporting a pilot initiative, under which Cisco and IBM are providing support directly to schools to operate the WebEx platform. This facilitates schools, with no alternative capability, with a collaborative platform to enable them engage with their students and staff. Officials in that Department are also liaising with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment to engage on the issues of barriers to connectivity impacting access to remote learning across all parts of the education and training system.

I should also say that during the COVID-19 crisis, the responsibility for the provision of education rests with the schools in which the children are currently enrolled. Children who reside in accommodation centres under contract to my Department under the system known as 'Direct Provision' are in the care of their parents and guardians. Similar to all other parents, they are responsible for ensuring that their children are engaging with education at this current time. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) and TUSLA Education Support Service (TESS) are supporting the schools and parents at this time. The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department is liaising with these services to ensure that the most vulnerable children, including those who are due to sit the State examinations are identified and supported. A communication pathway for schools, parents and centre managers in relation to education issues has been put in place. TESS Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) will identify children and families who may need assistance, liaising with schools and sourcing additional services/resources where necessary.

I understand that existing supports for groups under-represented in higher level education and at risk groups in further education and training, will be maintained and re-oriented as part of the response to Covid-19 by the Department of Education and Skills. These groups include learners in Direct Provision settings. A working-group on mitigating educational disadvantage is consulting with stakeholders in the further and higher education sectors on how best to ensure continuity of learning for individuals most at risk of being impacted by the pandemic.

In the Further Education and Training (FET) sector, Education and Training Boards ETBs are using all of the technology that is available to them to ensure that learners can continue their studies and stay engaged with education. If a learner does not have access to broadband or ICT equipment, ETB practitioners are keeping in touch with learners in various other ways, including by phone, or by having learning packs delivered to FET learners in adult literacy and English language programmes each week.

I can also inform the Deputy that my Department has developed a Strategic Framework for Engagement on Child and Family Issues in the context of school closures and social distancing requirements put in place during the COVID-19 crisis. The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) and Child and Family Welfare Team has developed this framework to support families living in our centres. In preparing the framework, outreach has taken place with key stakeholders including centre managers, TUSLA, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Rural and Community Development, the HSE, the Children's Rights Alliance, One Family and UNHCR. We will continue to work closely with these and other partners. The framework encompasses three broad themes under which actions will be rolled out: child and family welfare, identifying education requirements, and the general provision of activities for children.

Question

3.276 To ask the Minister for Justice & Equality what emergency measures have been put in place for International Students on temporary visas during the Covid19 pandemic to allow them to self isolate, what supports are being put in place and how these students are being supported to ensure they do not fall subject to poverty and illness

--Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire 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 (<http://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

3.277 To ask the Minister for Justice what actions he is taking to ensure that people in direct provision are supported in terms of it being a congregated setting making social distancing impossible, and what supports are being provided and to give an update on the what steps have been taken

--Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department and the HSE have worked closely together to support the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of the State's accommodation services.

Together, we have put in place a range of measures in all of the Department's Accommodation Centres to address any cases of COVID-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for self-isolation facilities in Centres and a number of offsite self-isolation Centres around the State. In all matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health advice from the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team is followed.

The established procedure across all Centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of quarantine until such time as the HSE considers that they can return to their centre with no risk to other residents or staff.

The additional 850 beds procured in recent weeks also means that we have reduced overall numbers of residents in some centres to further support social and physical distancing. We are ensuring that no more than 3 people are sharing a room (similar to a small sized family unit) in any of our centres.

Residents in centres 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. Our website <http://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 advice also includes UNHCR and WHO information in respect of safe practices for observing the month of Ramadan.

During this time, centre managers have been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal and recreational areas. Each manager must ensure that their centre has adequate supplies of cleaning products, soap, sanitiser, tissues and wipes. My Department has procured a large volume of hand sanitiser for our network of centres, which is being distributed as required.

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.

To further support social and physical distancing and to reduce contacts in the centres, all centres are currently closed to visitors. Centres without self-catering facilities are implementing measures to move to takeaway services, with the use of disposable tableware, as opposed to communal dining or have introduced staggered mealtimes to reduce contacts.

Question

3.278 To ask the Minister for Justice if he will consider additional funding to Safe Ireland to ensure that services can respond adequately to the needs of women and children during the pandemic and if he will make a statement on the matter.

--Ruairí Ó Murchú TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

I can reassure the Deputy that combatting domestic abuse is a priority for me and my Department. It is also 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 frontline services including 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, including through a specific operation (Operation Faoisimh).

Primary responsibility for funding frontline services such as those mentioned by the Deputy rests with Tusla. Details of the significant funding, amounting to an allocation of €25.3m in 2020, 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 has to date provided €196,000 in additional funding to organisations in the sector to support and extend the existing services they offer in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. I can confirm that as part of this total, Safe Ireland have been allocated €36,000 for additional personnel capacity and communicating with their service users.

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, that supports remain fully available to victims during the Covid-19 crisis, 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 abuse 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 abuse issues get prompt legal advice and legal representation in court where needed.
- The Courts Service is giving priority to domestic abuse 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.

These actions are in addition to the public awareness campaign referred to. This campaign, involving TV and radio advertisements as well as social and other media, is designed 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 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

3.282 To ask the Minister for Justice the number of confirmed Covid 19 infections in Direct Provision Centres

--Eoin Ó Broin TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department and the HSE have worked closely together to support the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of the State's accommodation services.

Together, we have put in place a range of measures in all of the Department's Accommodation Centres to address any cases of COVID-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for self-isolation facilities in Centres and a number of offsite self-isolation Centres around the State. In all matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health advice from the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team is followed.

The established procedure across all Centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of quarantine until such time as the HSE considers that they can return to their centre with no risk to other residents or staff.

As confirmed in our joint statement of 23 April (which can be found on our website www.justice.ie both my Department and the HSE are committed to protecting the identity and medical confidentiality of residents, as required by law. For this reason, neither the Department nor the HSE will give specific information about individuals or locations. The health authorities will only comment on cases or outbreaks of any illness (Covid-19 or otherwise) if there is a Public Health reason to do so.

Question

3.283 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality, in view of the importance and dangers around spreading the COVID-19 virus, can he outline why members of An Garda Síochána involved in checkpoint duties are not wearing gloves while requesting documentation or masks when approaching drivers

--Seán Crowe TD

Answer

As the Deputy is aware, An Garda Síochána is supporting the public health guidelines and restrictions to prevent or reduce spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community and protect public health during this pandemic.

An Garda Síochána is implementing a graduated policing response to this issue, based on its tradition of policing by consent. The operational guidance provides that Garda members engage, explain and encourage members of the public to comply and only as a last resort, resort to enforcement powers under these regulations.

The Commissioner is by law responsible for the administration and management of An Garda Síochána, including the distribution of resources and deployment of equipment. As Minister I have no role in those matters.

I am informed by An Garda Síochána that its guidelines for use by frontline Gardaí of personal protective equipment (PPE), including gloves and facemasks, are informed by a risk-based approach and in accordance with HSE/public health guidance.

The Commissioner has advised me that all Garda personnel, including those on patrol and on checkpoint duties, have been instructed to implement social distancing in their approaches to members of the public, to reduce the need to handle documents where practicable, and to engage in frequent hand hygiene using alcohol-based hand sanitisers and to wash their hands with soap and water on return to the station.

I am further informed that, in accordance with HSE guidance, the use of disposable facemasks is not currently recommended as a routine protective measure in non-healthcare settings. I understand that gloves and masks are available to Garda members on patrol and checkpoint duties, but are to be used in scenarios where exposure risk is heightened.

In addition, I am informed that a number of designated vehicles have been assigned to each Division, to respond to incidents in which suspected or confirmed cases of Covid19 are present. I am informed that these vehicles carry the PPE necessary to ensure an appropriate response to such incidents and that they are deployed by Garda management as required.

Finally, the Commissioner has informed me that An Garda Síochána's guidelines are kept under review based on public health advice.

Question

3.284 To ask the Minister of Justice and Equality what alternative arrangements have been put in place in relation to immigration registration appointments to allow applicants seeking to renew their registrations

--Chris Andrews 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 pandemic continues to apply for any registration that was due to be renewed between the 20/03/2020 and the 20/05/2020. However, this exceptional measure 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 (ISD) website, www.inis.gov.ie. This document is regularly updated.

Applicants may continue to contact the relevant Unit or Division via email and all 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

3.285 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality if he could make comment on practice of carpooling within services for which his department has responsibility for, and particularly within the prison service, if this practice should end immediately as it negates the concept of social distancing and the efforts to contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus

--Dessie Ellis TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

My Department has introduced a range of measures to enable continuity of services and to enable staff to continue working safely. These measures have been introduced in line with the guidance provided by the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team. They have included the closure of several of our public facing offices, and the introduction of remote working for the majority of staff with the Department. Similar measures have been introduced in the bodies under the Department's remit. Staff are only commuting and working from physical offices where absolutely necessary to do so. Where this is the case, appropriate social distancing measures have been put in place, and staff have been fully advised of the relevant public health guidance. Agencies and bodies under the Department have received similar instructions.

With respect to the Irish Prison Service, a range of measures have been introduced to safeguard the wellbeing of staff and prisoners. The actions of the Irish Prison Service are informed and guided by the advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team, and are consistent with the prison specific guidance for the management of Covid-19 issued by the World Health Organisation on 15 March 2020. 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 24 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.

A comprehensive communications plan has been rolled out by the Irish Prison Service for both staff and prisoners and the need for physical distancing has been central to all communications. With regard to carpooling a specific communication was issued by the Irish Prison Service on this issue reminding staff of the need to maintain social distancing while travelling to and from work.

Question

3.424 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality to report on the numbers of arrests and directions that have been issued by members of An Garda Síochána under the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Bill 2020; and to make a statement on the matter.

--Mick Barry TD

Answer

The Deputy refers to the powers which 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. These powers have been brought temporarily into effect through subsequent regulations signed by the Minister for Health – the Health Act, 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions)(Covid-19) Regulations 2020).

First, it is important to say that the purpose of these temporary powers is to support public health restrictions and in that way, prevent or reduce spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community and protect public health during this pandemic.

Second, 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. Policy is that Garda members engage, educate and encourage members of the public to comply and only as a last resort, resort to enforcement powers under these regulations. Use of the powers provided for in the Act and further detailed in the Regulations are therefore considered only where an individual, despite warnings, does not adhere to the guidelines.

In the interests of transparency and public confidence, I requested the Commissioner to compile and publish a record of any use of these powers. I warmly welcome the Commissioner's response in commencing publication of this data on a weekly basis.

I am informed by the Commissioner that there have been many thousands of interactions between Gardaí and members of the public since entry into effect of these regulations. I understand that between 8 and 18 April 2020, members of An Garda Síochána have conducted in excess of 10,000 checkpoints for the purpose of ensuring compliance with the Government's Covid-19 guidance and restrictions. In that time, I am informed that Gardaí have used their new powers sparingly - on only 34 occasions, as of 18 April.

I am further informed that, in the same period, there were 405 Covid-19 related incidents that started as potential breaches of the Regulations, but where other offences were identified during the incidents. As such, long-standing legislation for offences such as public order, assault, road traffic, and drugs was used instead.

This data published by the Commissioner demonstrates that there has been a very high level of public compliance with the temporary public health measures in place to inhibit the spread of Covid-19. I also regard these figures as confirmation that the graduated policing response adopted by Gardaí – engaging, educating, encouraging and only as a last resort enforcing – is understood and generally supported by the public. Nonetheless and to provide additional public assurance that these extraordinary measures are being implemented in an appropriate, proportionate and human rights compliant manner, I have asked the Policing Authority to assess and report regularly on the use of these regulations by An Garda Síochána. The Policing Authority provided me with the first such report on 20 April and will prepare further reports on a fortnightly basis.

For the convenience of Deputies and the public, further information on the use by An Garda Síochána of these powers and associated monitoring by the Policing Authority is available on my Department's website, at the following link: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Use_of_Covid-19_related_powers_by_An_Garda_S%C3%ADoch%C3%A1na

Question

3.425 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will undertake a Human Rights impact assessment on the Covid-19 regulations; and to identify if certain groups in society are being disproportionately impacted by the regulations; and to make a statement on the matter.

--Mick Barry TD

Answer

The Deputy refers to the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A -Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 121/2020) which were made on 10 April 2020 by the Minister for Health, having consulted with the Minister for Finance and for Public Expenditure and Reform and me as Minister for Justice and Equality.

First, I would recall that section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 places a positive duty on public sector bodies to have regard for the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights in their daily work. This includes a responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by policies and plans as defined by the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, including monitoring the equality and human rights impact of the regulations within this remit.

In so far as matters provided for in these regulations fall within the remit of my Department and the agencies under its aegis, due cognisance is being taken of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

I recognise that the temporary powers given to Gardaí in support of the public health restrictions on movement and gatherings are far-reaching. Because of this and in the interests of transparency and public confidence, I requested the Commissioner to compile and publish a record of any use of these powers, on a weekly basis.

I am informed by the Commissioner that there have been many thousands of interactions between Gardaí and members of the public since entry into effect of these regulations. I understand that between 8 and 18 April 2020, members of An Garda Síochána have conducted in excess of 10,000 checkpoints for the purpose of ensuring compliance with the Government's Covid-19 guidance and restrictions. In that time, I am informed that Gardaí have used their new powers sparingly - on only 34 occasions, as of 18 April.

This data published by the Commissioner demonstrates that there has been a very high level of public compliance with the temporary public health measures in place to inhibit the spread of Covid-19. Nonetheless and to provide additional public assurance that these extraordinary measures are being implemented in an appropriate, proportionate and human rights compliant manner, I have asked the Policing Authority to assess and report regularly on the use of these regulations by An Garda Síochána. The Policing Authority are consulting with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and other bodies including a number of NGOs operating in this area. They have provided the first such report on 20 April and will prepare further reports on a fortnightly basis.

For the convenience of Deputies and the public, further information on the use by An Garda Síochána of these powers and associated monitoring by the Policing Authority is available on my Department's website, at the following link: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Use_of_Covid-19_related_powers_by_An_Garda_S%C3%ADoch%C3%A1na

Although not relating directly to the regulations, the Deputy may also be interested to know that, consistent with a human rights approach to this emergency, my Department has considered and

prioritised the needs and rights of groups who may be particularly vulnerable in the context of Covid-19.

For example, 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 and the maintenance of staffing levels. A significant amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service in this regard, informed and guided by the advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), 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 taken to date include:

- Granting of temporary release to low-risk prisoners, following a case-by-case assessment, to reduce overcrowding and allow for an effective infection control regime, including physical distancing, to the greatest extent possible.
- Restrictions on access to prisons, in particular suspension of family visits with effect from 28 March.
- Introduction of a basic health check, including taking of temperatures, for all persons entering prisons from 29 March and quarantining for up to 14 days of all prisoners newly committed to prison.
- All prisoners aged 70 years or more or those that are deemed medically vulnerable are being "cocooned".
- To reduce risk of cross-contamination, certain activities such as work and training, have been curtailed to reduce cross-prison movements and interactions, and the prison schools have been closed.

While these important measures are in place to safeguard the physical wellbeing of staff, prisoners and their families, steps are also being taken to maintain good communication with prisoners and staff; and to allow prisoners to maintain human contact during these difficult times including through an electronic video visit system.

It is also the case that, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department and the HSE have worked closely together to support the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of the State's accommodation services. Together, we have put in place a range of measures in all of the Department's Accommodation Centres to address any cases of Covid-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for self-isolation facilities in Centres and a number of offsite self-isolation Centres around the State. The additional 850 beds procured in recent weeks also means that we have reduced overall numbers of residents in some centres to further support social and physical distancing. We have cocooned all residents considered to be especially vulnerable at this time based on age or identified medical illness. 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.

Another group of particular concern in the context of this pandemic are victims of domestic abuse. In recognition of the added fear and risk of domestic abuse which some people face, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions, my Department has developed an inter-agency plan to address domestic violence, including increased funding to frontline services. An Garda Síochána also continues to prioritise domestic abuse during this time and arrangements have been made to ensure that the civil and criminal justice system can continue to give priority to domestic abuse during this crisis. Added to this, my Department is leading a public awareness campaign in response to the threat of domestic abuse during the Covid-19. I am particularly pleased that this campaign is being conducted as a partnership between my Department and services and supports in the community and voluntary

sector. Additional information on the supports and services available may be found on the website www.stillhere.ie

As the Deputy may be aware, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has also this week indicated its intention to engage with An Garda Síochána in relation to the use of its powers under the Regulations; and in general to keep the exercise of emergency legislation and other State responses to the COVID 19 crisis under active review. I am confident that this analysis and review will be valuable to all stakeholders.

Question

3.426 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality how many Garda checkpoints have been mounted since the Covid-19 regulations have been in force and how that figure would compare to the typical number of garda checkpoints; and to make a statement on the matter.

--Mick Barry TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

As the Deputy is aware, An Garda Síochána is supporting the public health guidelines and restrictions to prevent or reduce spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community and protect public health during this pandemic.

An Garda Síochána is implementing a graduated policing response to this issue, based on its tradition of policing by consent. The operational guidance provides that Garda members engage, explain and encourage members of the public to comply and only as a last resort, resort to enforcement powers under these regulations. I am informed by the Commissioner that there have been many thousands of interactions between Gardaí and members of the public since entry into effect of these regulations. I understand that, for example, between 8 and 18 April 2020, members of An Garda Síochána have conducted in excess of 10,000 checkpoints for the purpose of ensuring compliance with the Covid-19 guidance and restrictions.

The Deputy will appreciate that checkpoints are routinely conducted by An Garda Síochána for a range of purposes and reasons, including for example road traffic enforcement as well as checkpoints in support of specific targeted operations, including serious organised crime etc., and I understand these are continuing at present. The numbers of such checkpoints varies depending on the operational requirements, for example, in just one category – Mandatory Intoxication Checkpoints – I understand that An Garda Síochána conducted over 5300 such MIT checkpoints nationwide during April 2019. The Deputy will appreciate that this is not a direct comparison, given that Garda checkpoints may be required and conducted for a range of other operational reasons.

In the course of these checkpoints as well as in other interactions with the public, it is clear that Gardaí have used their arrest powers sparingly - on only 34 occasions, as of 18 April. I am further informed that, in the same period, there were 405 Covid-19 related incidents that started as potential breaches of the Regulations, but where other offences were identified during the incidents. As such, long-standing legislation for offences such as public order, assault, road traffic, and drugs was used instead.

This data which is published on a weekly basis by the Commissioner demonstrates that there has been a very high level of public compliance with the temporary public health measures in place to inhibit the spread of Covid-19. I also regard these figures as confirmation that the graduated policing response adopted by Gardaí – engaging, educating, encouraging and only as a last resort enforcing – is understood and generally supported by the public. Nonetheless and to provide additional public assurance that these extraordinary measures are being implemented in an appropriate, proportionate and human rights compliant manner, I have asked the Policing Authority to assess and report regularly on the use of these regulations by An Garda Síochána. The Policing Authority provided me with the first such report on 20 April and will prepare further reports on a fortnightly basis.

For the convenience of Deputies and the public, further information on the use by An Garda Síochána of these powers and associated monitoring by the Policing Authority is available on my Department's website, at the following link: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Use_of_Covid-19_related_powers_by_An_Garda_S%C3%ADoch%C3%A1na

Question

3.427 To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality how many Garda checkpoints have had the presence of armed Gardaí and if he feels that it is proportionate to have armed Gardaí at checkpoints intended to oversee public health measures which have a high level of compliance; and to make a statement on the matter.

--Mick Barry TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

As the Deputy is aware, An Garda Síochána is supporting the public health guidelines and restrictions to prevent or reduce spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community and protect public health during this pandemic.

An Garda Síochána is implementing a graduated policing response to this issue, based on its tradition of policing by consent. The operational guidance provides that Garda members engage, explain and encourage members of the public to comply and only as a last resort, resort to enforcement powers under these regulations.

I am informed by the Commissioner that there have been many thousands of interactions between Gardaí and members of the public since entry into effect of these regulations. I understand that, for example, between 8 and 18 April 2020, members of An Garda Síochána have conducted in excess of 10,000 checkpoints for the purpose of ensuring compliance with the Covid-19 guidance and restrictions.

The Deputy will appreciate that checkpoints are routinely conducted by An Garda Síochána for a range of purposes and reasons, including for example road traffic enforcement as well as checkpoints in support of specific targeted operations, including serious organised crime etc, and I understand these are continuing at present.

I am informed by the Garda Commissioner that armed Gardaí are frequently deployed in support of uniformed colleagues at checkpoints, for operational reasons, however, armed Gardaí are not, routinely, being deployed at COVID-19 checkpoints, although they may have been present at some of those checkpoints which have taken place up to Saturday, 18 April 2020.

In the course of these checkpoints as well as in other interactions with the public, it is clear that Gardaí have used their arrest powers sparingly - on only 34 occasions, as of 18 April. I am informed that no personal details or other records are recorded by Gardaí of the thousands of occasions where members of the public have complied with the guidelines or have agreed to comply during the first three stages.

In the same period, there were 405 Covid-19 related incidents that started as potential breaches of the Regulations, but where other offences were identified during the incidents. As such, long-standing legislation for offences such as public order, assault, road traffic, and drugs was used instead. For example, while conducting Covid-19 patrols or checkpoints, Gardaí have had a number of significant seizures of drugs and other illicit items, including firearms, and have made arrests in that regard.

The data which is published on a weekly basis by the Commissioner demonstrates that there has been a very high level of public compliance with the temporary public health measures in place to inhibit the spread of Covid-19. I also regard these figures as confirmation that the graduated policing response adopted by Gardaí – engaging, educating, encouraging and only as a last resort enforcing – is understood and generally supported by the public. Nonetheless and to provide additional public assurance that these extraordinary measures are being implemented in an appropriate, proportionate

and human rights compliant manner, I have asked the Policing Authority to assess and report regularly on the use of these regulations by An Garda Síochána. The Policing Authority provided me with the first such report on 20 April and will prepare further reports on a fortnightly basis.

For the convenience of Deputies and the public, further information on the use by An Garda Síochána of these powers and associated monitoring by the Policing Authority is available on my Department's website, at the following link: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Use_of_Covid-19_related_powers_by_An_Garda_S%C3%ADoch%C3%A1na

Question

3.433 - To ask the Minister for justice; if there are any plans to extended the period of allowed unpaid Maternity Leave to new mothers who are currently off work and are now also currently on leave due to COVID19.

--Frank Feighan TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

Maternity leave is governed by the Maternity Protection Acts 1994 and 2004. It entitles a mother to 26 weeks' paid maternity leave after the birth of their baby (subject to qualifying conditions) and up to a further 16 weeks' additional unpaid maternity leave. Unpaid maternity leave begins immediately after the end of maternity leave and the purpose is to allow the mother to spend additional time with their baby prior to returning to work.

There are no plans at present to alter the duration of the 16 weeks' additional maternity leave.

Question

3.6 - To ask the Minister for Finance if he is considering the introduction of a reprieve scheme post COVID19 to help small and micro businesses stay open?

--Frank Feighan TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government has introduced a broad range of measures and supports to respond to the needs of businesses experiencing difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am strongly supportive of the efforts being made to assist businesses by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

Question

3.214 To ask the Minister for Finance What measures are in place to assist businesses regarding commercial rents?

--Kathleen Funchion TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

The Government has introduced a broad range of measures and supports to respond to the needs of businesses experiencing difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular I am strongly supportive of the efforts being made by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation to assist businesses.

Where commercial rents are concerned, this area of the law is very complex and characterized by a multiplicity of contractual arrangements which reflect the diversity of the landlord and tenant relationship in the commercial sphere. I urge all parties to commercial leases to show forbearance and understanding during this very difficult time.

Question

3. 476 - To ask the Minister for Justice and Equality if people who came to Ireland on a holiday visa and whose visa has now expired, and who could not leave due to the Lockdown restrictions on travel, will be charged with a criminal offence for not having a valid visa, and can he make a statement on the matter.

--Roderic O'Gorman TD

Answer

Minister Flanagan:

Under the measures I announced on 20 March 2020, people residing in the State whose permission is due to expire between that date and 20 May 2020 have been automatically renewed for a period of two months. The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach. In the case of those on a holiday visa they will have their temporary permission to remain extended by two months on the same conditions that apply to a short stay permission. For example, a person in the State on visitors condition cannot enter employment.

As part of the emergency response to COVID-19, the Registration Office in Burgh Quay and all local registration offices for non-Dublin residents operated by An Garda Síochána are currently closed until further notice. All existing appointments are cancelled. The requirement to register an immigration permission will not arise until Burgh Quay (and other registration offices) re-opens or alternative arrangements are put in place.

A detailed Frequently Asked Questions document is available on the Immigration Service website ([http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ\[3\].pdf/Files/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ\[3\].pdf](http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ[3].pdf/Files/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ[3].pdf)). This document is updated regularly.

In general terms, I can advise the Deputy that all non-EEA nationals who come to Ireland on a holiday visa are required by law to have a valid permission to be in the State. Anyone without such a valid permission is unlawfully present in the State. This applies to all such persons visiting for short term visits such as a holiday, business or other reasons. Non-EEA nationals who visit the State may be granted a maximum of 90 days visitor permission by an immigration officer when they enter at the port of entry. This applies to both non-visa required nationals and visa required nationals.

If a non EEA national's visitor permission expired prior to the 20 March 2020, they should immediately contact the Immigration Service Delivery of my Department in order to regularise their situation in the State. The relevant contact details are:

Extension of a visit to Ireland
Extension of Visit Permission Unit (EVICS)
Immigration Service Delivery
Department of Justice and Equality
PO Box 12695
Ireland
Email: EVICsResidenceDivision@justice.ie
Web: Extension of Visit Permission Unit (EVICS)

Question

3.495 - To ask the Minister, if he is aware there have been some concerns around the breach of court ordered access rights for parents to see their children at this time, and can he make a statement on the matter.

--Roderic O'Gorman 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 and guardianship.

It is important to point out that court orders in relation to custody agreements remain in place. 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.

Obviously, 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 that are to the satisfaction of both parties. Such agreements should be noted by email or text message.

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. Other free parent support services which provide help and advice are available from www.onefamily.ie and www.treoir.ie.

While court offices are still open, they are only open for urgent business, and by appointment only. Categories of family law matters considered urgent are applications for interim barring orders, emergency barring orders and protection orders. However, according to the Practice Direction of the President of the District Court, a case which does not fall within these categories can be treated as urgent if there are strong and pressing reasons to make an urgent application to Court. An email can be sent to the relevant court office setting out the reasons why the case should be considered urgent. The applicant will be notified of the Court's decision by email. Contact details for offices are available on <https://beta.courts.ie/content/find-us>. The Statement of the President of the District Court can be accessed at this link <https://beta.courts.ie/news/president-district-court-updated-family-law-statement>

I would also appeal to everyone to remember that at all times, the welfare of the child is paramount in these situations.

* The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) Regulations 2020, regulation 4(2)(n).

Question

3.494 To ask the minister for justice and equality whether gardai have been afforded access to face masks for the purpose of carrying out their duties, including the arrest of suspects?

--Jim O'Callaghan TD

Answer

As the Deputy is aware, An Garda Síochána is supporting the public health guidelines and restrictions to prevent or reduce spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community and protect public health during this pandemic.

An Garda Síochána is implementing a graduated policing response to this issue, based on its tradition of policing by consent. The operational guidance provides that Garda members engage, explain and encourage members of the public to comply and only as a last resort, resort to enforcement powers under these regulations.

The Commissioner is by law responsible for the administration and management of An Garda Síochána, including the distribution of resources and deployment of equipment. As Minister I have no role in those matters.

I am informed by An Garda Síochána that its guidelines for use by frontline Gardaí of personal protective equipment (PPE), including gloves and facemasks, are informed by a risk-based approach and in accordance with HSE/public health guidance.

The Commissioner has advised me that all Garda personnel, including those on patrol and on checkpoint duties, have been instructed to implement social distancing in their approaches to members of the public, to reduce the need to handle documents where practicable, and to engage in frequent hand hygiene using alcohol-based hand sanitisers and to wash their hands with soap and water on return to the station.

I am further informed that, in accordance with HSE guidance, the use of disposable facemasks is not currently recommended as a routine protective measure in non-healthcare settings. I understand that gloves and masks are available to Garda members on patrol and checkpoint duties, but are to be used in scenarios where exposure risk is heightened.

In addition, I am informed that a number of designated vehicles have been assigned to each Division, to respond to incidents in which suspected or confirmed cases of Covid19 are present. I am informed that these vehicles carry the PPE necessary to ensure an appropriate response to such incidents and that they are deployed by Garda management as required.

Finally, the Commissioner has informed me that An Garda Síochána's guidelines are kept under review based on public health advice.

Question

3.487 To ask the Minister for Justice & Equality how many people are currently in Direct Provision in Waterford, what is the age breakdown, how many of them have been diagnosed as having Covid 19, how many are in self-isolation, how many have been moved out and if he would make a statement on the matter.

--Marc Ó Cathasaigh TD

3.488 To ask the Minister for Justice & Equality what provisions he has put in place for residents in Direct Provision in Waterford who need to self isolate for a variety of reasons, who have been diagnosed with Covid 19, and for those who may need step down care after a period of hospitalisation and if these provisions allow families to stay together and if he would make a statement on the matter. --Marc Ó Cathasaigh TD

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I am proposing to answer questions 3.487 and 3.488 together.

I can confirm for the Deputy that my Department has a contracted capacity of 427 bed spaces in Co. Waterford for international protection applicants. As of 22 April 2020, a total of 401 persons were being accommodated. My Department is not in a position at this time to provide an age breakdown of residents within our accommodation in the Waterford region.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department and the HSE have worked closely together to support the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of the State's accommodation services.

Together, we have put in place a range of measures in all of the Department's Accommodation Centres to address any cases of COVID-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for self-isolation facilities in Centres and a number of offsite self-isolation Centres around the State. In all matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health advice from the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team is followed.

The established procedure across all Centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of quarantine until such time as the HSE considers that they can return to their centre with no risk to other residents or staff.

The additional 850 beds procured in recent weeks also means that we have reduced overall numbers of residents in some centres to further support social and physical distancing. We are ensuring that no more than 3 people are sharing a room (similar to a small sized family unit) in any of our centres.

Residents in centres 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. 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 advice also includes UNHCR and WHO information in respect of safe practices for observing the month of Ramadan.

During this time, centre managers have been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal and recreational areas. Each

manager must ensure that their centre has adequate supplies of cleaning products, soap, sanitiser, tissues and wipes. My Department has procured a large volume of hand sanitiser for our network of centres, which is being distributed as required.

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.

To further support social and physical distancing and to reduce contacts in the centres, all centres are currently closed to visitors. Centres without self-catering facilities are implementing measures to move to takeaway services, with the use of disposable tableware, as opposed to communal dining or have introduced staggered mealtimes to reduce contacts.

As confirmed in our joint statement of 23 April (which is available on our website www.justice.ie, both my Department and the HSE are committed to protecting the identity and medical confidentiality of residents, as required by law. For this reason, neither the Department nor the HSE will give specific information about individuals or locations. The health authorities will only comment on cases or outbreaks of any illness (Covid-19 or otherwise) if there is a Public Health reason to do so.

Question

3.603 Can the Minister confirm the exact numbers residing at the Direct Provision Centre the Skellig Star in Cahersiveen? Further will the Minister confirm if there are plans going forward to increase or decrease these numbers?

--Norma Foley TD

3.604 Is the Department satisfied that all measures necessary 're Covid 19 protection as advised by the Dept. Of Health and NPHET are in operation at the Skellig Star? I am specifically referring to social distancing, cocooning of vulnerable residents, sterilizing of common areas etc.

Answer

Minister of State Stanton:

I am proposing to answer questions 3.603 and 3.604 together.

The Skellig Accommodation Centre in Cahersiveen has a contracted capacity for 150 residents. As of 24 April 2020, there are 89 residents. There are no plans to increase the number of residents at this time and the last resident arrived more than three weeks ago.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department and the HSE have worked closely together to support the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of the State's accommodation services.

Together, we have put in place a range of measures in all of the Department's Accommodation Centres to address any cases of COVID-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for self-isolation facilities in Centres and a number of offsite self-isolation Centres around the State. In all matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health advice from the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team is followed.

The established procedure across all Centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of quarantine until such time as the HSE considers that they can return to their centre with no risk to other residents or staff.

The additional 850 beds procured in recent weeks also means that we have reduced overall numbers of residents in some centres to further support social and physical distancing. We are ensuring that no more than three people are sharing a room (similar to a small sized family unit) in any of our centres. In the Skellig Accommodation Centre no more than two non-family members are sharing a room. This additional accommodation has also enabled us to cocoon the most vulnerable residents based on age or serious medical illness.

Residents in centres 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. 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 advice also includes UNHCR and WHO information in respect of safe practices for observing the month of Ramadan.

During this time, centre managers have been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal and recreational areas. Each manager must ensure that their centre has adequate supplies of cleaning products, soap, sanitiser,

tissues and wipes. My Department has procured a large volume of hand sanitiser for our network of centres, which is being distributed as required.

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.

To further support social and physical distancing and to reduce contacts in the centres, all centres are currently closed to visitors. Management in the Skellig Accommodation Centre have implemented the following measures to help their residents and staff practice social and physical distancing in the centre:

Staggered meals: only one resident at a time is allowed at the serving area to collect their meals, they stay 2 metres away from staff.

Laundry: only one person at a time enters the laundry area to wash their clothes or collect them.

Sanitising areas: Hand sanitisers have been provided at the entrance of the centre so people leaving or entering the building can sanitise their hands. They have also been placed at the entrance of the dining area so people leaving or entering dining area can sanitise their hands.

Personal protection equipment (PPE): the centre has distributed facial masks and gloves to all staff and residents.

Signage: there are notices and signage displayed in various places in the centre to make residents aware of practicing social distancing and how to safeguard themselves and others around them and to maintain the 2 metre distance.

Isolation rooms: the centre has dedicated some rooms to be used as isolation rooms should GPs request this to keep some residents isolated from others. These residents are required to remain in the room allocated to them and meals are provided for them. In line with HSE guidance, staff leave the meals etc. at the bedroom door and no direct contact is made between the staff and the resident.