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# Staff to be redeployed in overhaul of booster campaign

Hundreds more GPs and pharmacists to be asked to join revised programme

Government resistant to any major new restrictions, aiming to keep schools open

JENNIFER BRAY and PAT LEAHY

The State's booster campaign is to be overhauled with a massive redeployment of health-care and public sector staff, who will be asked to prioritise Covid-19 vaccinations in the face of a potentially imminent Omicron wave.

Hundreds more general practitioners and pharmacists will be asked to join the booster programme as the State races against time to give the population adequate protection against the latest Covid-19 variant.

The Government is extremely resistant to the idea of any major new restrictions and is placing the focus firmly on the revised vaccination campaign which will be launched imminently by the HSE.

Many vaccination centres will have extended opening hours, from 8am to 8pm, there will be extra centres in Dublin and Cork and other areas as well as increased capacity in existing centres.

A source said the inoculation campaign had now entered its most challenging period since last January and that multiple workforces would be redeployed.

The Government will lean heavily on general practitioners as part of a "national effort" to prioritise vaccinations, meaning there will be less availability for other health issues. The plan is to have every GP vaccinating the public, up from the estimated 75 per cent currently providing this service. The Government also wants to see 1,000 pharmacies giving the jabs, up from about 550.

### High-risk children

The pace of the campaign will be accelerated and from December 20th the inoculation of high-risk children will begin, with other cohorts following from January 10th.

A senior source said that people in their 30s and 40s can expect to hear "this side of Christmas" when they will be offered the next dose.

Taoiseach Micheál Martin last night called on the country to "hold the collective nerve"

as the latest figures show that approximately 1.25 million have received a booster shot.

Chief medical officer Dr Tony Holohan said results yesterday indicated that approximately 14 per cent of the State's new infections were now due to the new Omicron variant.

He updated the Coalition's three party leaders last night ahead of a crunch meeting of the National Public Health Emergency Team (Nphet) tomorrow.

### School holidays

Government figures are extremely resistant to any suggestion of harsh new restrictions, while Mr Martin has said there is no plan to close schools early "at this stage".

He told RTE that a "collective objective of all of us is to keep schools open".

Aspokesman for the Department of Education said the scheduling of school holiday periods are not due to change.

Meanwhile, there is concern in Government about younger age groups who got the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine and who may be especially vulnerable now as they wait their turn. The issue has been raised with Dr Holohan and the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (Niac).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday Covid-19 vaccines appeared to have become slightly less effective in preventing severe disease and death, but did provide "significant protection".

The Omicron variant should not be dismissed as "mild", WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"Omicron is spreading at a rate we have not seen with any previous variant."

"Even if Omicron does cause less severe disease, the sheer number of cases could once again overwhelm unprepared health systems."

**How big a threat is Omicron to Ireland?**, page 2; **Germany fears growth in forged passes**, page 6; **Editorial comment**, page 11



## Facing forward Images from the past

Uma Kadamakudi (14) from Confey College, Leixlip, at the launch exhibition for In Our Own Image: Photography in Ireland 1839 to the Present in The Printworks, Dublin Castle. The exhibition continues until February 6th.

Photograph: Kenneth O'Halloran

# Calls for pandemic subsidy ban over dividends

Mercedes distributor paid dividend after receiving €1.8m in Covid wage subsidies

MARK PAUL  
Business Affairs Correspondent

Companies that took taxpayer-funded payments to cope with the pandemic and then paid dividends to their shareholders should be banned from availing of further State subsidies, according to a Government TD.

Jim O'Callaghan, Fianna

Fáil TD for Dublin Bay South, made the call after The Irish Times revealed that the company which distributes Mercedes-Benz cars in Ireland received almost €1.8 million in pandemic wage subsidies last year. It paid a similar amount in a cash dividend, also last year, to an offshore company controlled by the family that owns the business.

O'Flaherty Holdings, which is owned by the O'Flaherty family through MML Holdings, made operating profits of almost €10 million in 2020. It paid the dividend to Hailstone Holdings, a company registered in the Isle of Man.

A spokesman for the company suggested it was coincidence that the taxpayer subsidy and the dividend were near-identical amounts.

He was unable to provide a statement from the company following a request for comment to chief executive Paddy Finnegan.

Last year, Mr O'Callaghan

asked Minister for Finance Paschal Donohoe whether companies in the State's flagship employment wage subsidy scheme (EWSS) were banned from paying dividends. Mr Donohoe replied that he was "advised by Revenue that the issue of what dividends a company may or may not be in a position to pay to shareholders... are matters that are outside the remit" of the scheme.

### Compliance measures

The Department of Finance yesterday declined to comment on the O'Flaherty Holdings dividend. It said the wage subsidy

scheme, which has so far paid almost €5.7 billion to employers, "incorporates compliance measures" and it referred to a statement last week by Mr Donohoe. However, the EWSS includes no compliance measures for dividends.

The Revenue Commissioners said the payment of dividends is "not a matter covered in the overarching legislation" that backs up the wage subsidy scheme. "The... payment of dividends by companies claiming Covid supports is a tax policy matter," it said, referencing the Department of Finance.

Mr O'Callaghan suggested

companies that took subsidies and then paid dividends were not following the "spirit" of State assistance schemes.

"The terms of the schemes should be amended to ensure that no dividends can be paid out by companies that are in receipt of pandemic supports," he said.

He said if cash could not be clawed back, then companies that took supports and paid dividends should be "precluded" from future support.

**Mercedes' Irish distributor paid €1.8m dividend after getting Covid subsidy**, page 12

# Families of victims to receive 'Brandon' report today

KITTY HOLLAND  
Social Affairs Correspondent

The executive summary of the "Brandon" report into prolonged sexual abuse of intellectually disabled residents at a HSE-run disability centre in Donegal, will be published tomorrow.

A senior source told The Irish Times that following consultations with gardai, the 13-page executive summary would be provided to the families of Brandon's victims today in advance of publication. Staff at Ard Greine Court campus in Stranorlar, where the abuse took place, will get copies and be briefed today.

The Minister of State for disabilities, Anne Rabbitte, is awaiting legal advice from the Attorney General as to whether she can publish the full report.

The Brandon report, completed

by the National Independent Review Panel (NIRP) in August 2020, finds that a former resident, given the pseudonym Brandon, perpetrated at least 108 sexual assaults on upwards of 18 intellectually disabled adults, most of them non-verbal, between 2003 and 2016.

It says the "common strategy" to manage Brandon - to move him from ward to ward - "simply gave him access to a new cohort of clients whom he proceeded to assault until he was moved on again".

None of the families was told about the abuse of their loved ones until December 2018, a decade after the abuse in some cases. While several have called for publication of the full report, the HSE has maintained its stance that it will publish only the executive summary.

The report says Brandon's assaults continued "unabated"

and with the "full knowledge" of management.

Nursing staff tried repeatedly to stop the abuse, reporting it to management, it says. In 2011 a number of experts recommended Brandon's contact with other residents be stopped and his victims' families be told. The assaults, however, continued and families were not informed for several years.

Brandon was moved to Brentwood Manor, a private nursing home in Convooy, Co Donegal in May 2016 and died there last year.

The abuse came to light in 2016 when a whistleblower approached local independent TD, Thomas Pringle. He reported it to HSE management in the county and the then minister for disabilities, Finian McGrath. A look-back review, completed in 2018, led to the HSE commissioning the NIRP review.

## Weather

Outbreaks of rain across the north of the country. Staying drier in the south with sunny spells. Highs of 8 to 11 degrees.

THE IRISH TIMES  
24-28 Tara Street, Dublin 2, D02 CX89  
Telephone: (01) 6758000  
Fax: Newsdesk 6758036; Sport 6758033; Business 6758048; Advertising 6758002  
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## Home News

**Direct provision:** Twenty-nine people have died in the system over the past five years, according to figures released by the Department of Justice for the first time; page 4

**Irish Water:** The failure to improve treatment plants has left many water supplies vulnerable the EPA has said; page 3

## World News

**UK:** Boris Johnson has suffered a massive backbench rebellion as over 100 Conservative MPs voted against the introduction of Covid passes; page 6

## Business Today

**Aviation:** A start-up that hopes to manufacture vertical lift electric aircraft is in early-stage engagement with the IDA over a production facility; page 13

**Dublin:** An Bórd Pleanála has approved a 241-unit apartment scheme on former Blackrock College lands; page 12

## Sports Wednesday

**Rugby:** Having announced he is leaving Munster Johann van Graan is being tipped to join Bath as head coach; page 16

**Soccer:** Kevin De Bruyne scored twice as Manchester City hammered Leeds United 7-0 in the Premier League last night; page 17

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# Business Today

Wednesday, December 15th, 2021 Editor Ciarán Hancock Twitter @IrishTimesBiz email finance@irishtimes.com

## Mercedes' Irish distributor paid €1.8m dividend after getting Covid subsidy

Company controlled by O'Flaherty family paid the dividend to an offshore entity  
Firm received about same amount in State supports despite 80% rise in profits

MARK PAUL  
Business Affairs Correspondent

The Irish family-owned group that distributes Mercedes-Benz cars in Ireland received close to €1.8 million in taxpayer-funded pandemic subsidies last year, but it also paid a similar amount as a dividend to the offshore company that controls the busi-

ness. Despite the pandemic, O'Flaherty Holdings, owned by members of the wealthy O'Flaherty family through MML Holdings, recorded a rise in its profits for the year of more than 80 per cent to almost €13.1 million, accounts show.  
The group's chief executive, Paddy Finnegan, has been contacted for comment about the

payment of the dividend to the O'Flaherty family's company at a time when the companies also accepted large State subsidies from taxpayers. He had not commented at the time of publication.

**Rise in profits**  
Earlier in the pandemic some companies, such as stockbroker firm Goodbody and CRH, the building materials giant, announced they would return taxpayer wage subsidies to the State.

Recently-filed accounts for MML suggest that €3.8 million of its rise in profits came from a gain on the winding up of its pension scheme. But profits on its ordinary trading activities

still rose over the year by 15 per cent to €9.6 million.

A 15 per cent decline in the O'Flaherty group's turnover to €228.5 million was partially cushioned by €1.764 million in

**€13.1m**

Profits at O'Flaherty Holdings last year

payments from the State's pandemic wage subsidy scheme, which contributed towards the wages of workers in businesses that faced closure during lockdown.

MML's accounts give details of this payment, as well as a

€1.79 million dividend paid to Hailstone Holdings, the O'Flaherty family-controlled entity in the Isle of Man that sits at the apex of the group.

The accounts signed off in September include a note from the directors on the effects of the pandemic on its performance, saying that "despite the impact that Covid-19 has had on operations to date, the group has maintained a strong balance sheet position".

**Cash**

Its balance sheet shows that the group's cash pile at the end of 2020 had grown to €33.2 million from €26.6 million. Its net assets grew over the year by almost €9 million to €270 mil-

lion, while its accumulated profits stood at €264 million. It employs 310 staff.

O'Flaherty Holdings includes Motor Distributors Limited (MDL), which imports Mercedes-Benz into Ireland. The group also owns a large network of motor dealerships, as well as investment properties.

The group has its roots in a company founded by legendary Irish businessman Stephen O'Flaherty, grandfather of the current generation that owns the business. He built the group in the 1950s after securing the franchise for Ireland and the UK for Volkswagen. He eventually became one of the richest men in Ireland. MDL is no longer a distributor of Volkswagen.

## 241 units in Blackrock granted planning

GORDON DEEGAN

An Bord Pleanála has cleared the way for construction of a planned €135 million build-to-rent apartment scheme on former Blackrock College lands in Co Dublin.

The board has granted permission for the 241-unit scheme by Lioncor at lands at Cross Avenue on a site adjacent to the private fee-paying school under strategic housing development rules.

The scheme by Lioncor subsidiary, 1 Players Land Ltd, comprises three blocks, with one reaching to nine storeys.

An Bord Pleanála granted planning permission over the recommendation of Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council that it be refused on the basis that the scheme will have a detrimental impact on the character of the area due to its scale, height and visual prominence.

Local residents also expressed concern over the scheme.

**Concerns**

One of the third parties to express concerns was the rector at St Philips and St James' Church, Rev Canon Gillian Wharton.

"Given the proposed development's immediate proximity to our grounds and church, we consider the scale and particularly the height of the proposed development will dwarf the church and be problematic for the range of activities undertaken on our campus," he told the planning board.

The St Margaret's Residents Association had registered its opposition to the scheme while the board of management of Booters-town National School had also raised concerns.

Lioncor purchased the site at Cross Avenue for about €16 million last year from the order responsible for Blackrock College, the Holy Ghost or Spiritan congregation.

**Downsizing**

The appeals board inspector in the case, Máire Daly, said there was ample justification for a build-to-rent development at the site due to its location "close to employment centres and beside high quality public transport facilities".

"The proposed residential type and tenure will provide a viable housing solution to households where home-ownership may not be a priority and will provide a greater choice for people in the rental sector," she said.

She was satisfied that the units would accommodate a range of age cohorts and household types, including those downsizing and freeing up under-occupied larger units in the vicinity, all of which, she said, was appropriate in terms of achieving a sustainable mix of household sizes and types.

Ms Daly concluded the development would not result in any significant adverse impacts on residential amenities or nearby school amenities by way of direct overlooking.



## Singing Ireland's praises May joins Tourism Ireland bid to attract British visitors

■ Singer-songwriter Imelda May with Tourism Ireland chief executive Niall Gibbons on Dublin's Grafton Street during filming for the series Voices of

Ireland, which premiered on Sky Arts and Sky's Now streaming app last night. The two-part documentary series, which promotes Ireland to

potential British visitors, was made for Sky and Tourism Ireland by Red Shoe Productions. The "literary travelogue" will see Ms May meet well-known

Irish personalities including Moya Brennan, Stephen Rea and Sharon Shannon. PHOTOGRAPH: SHANE O'NEILL/COALESCÉ

## Tetrarch Capital mulls sale of Killashee Hotel

BARRY O'HALLORAN

Investor Tetrarch Capital is mulling the sale of Killashee Hotel in Co Kildare, one of the company's higher profile properties.

Tetrarch, run by Michael McElligott and James Byrne, owns hotels and offices mainly close to Dublin. The company is understood to be considering the sale of the well-known 140-bedroom four-star property close to Naas, Co Kildare.

Tetrarch has not commented on the move, but local sources say that a possible sale has been on the cards for some time.

Along with Mount Juliet in Thomastown, Co Kilkenny and Citywest in Saggart, Co Dublin, the Killashee is one of several well-known hotels that Tetrarch owns.

The property business also owns Millennium Park Lands, an industrial estate in Osbertown, Naas, where tenants in-

clude Irish food group Kerry. Speculation has linked several buyers to a deal for the Killashee. However, the process is understood to be at an early stage, with the prospect of a sale some time away.

**Rescue plan**

Tetrarch bought the Killashee in 2014 for €13 million from its owner Craigfort Taverns, which was under court protection from creditors at the time. The deal was part of a rescue

plan put together by an examiner appointed by the courts to help Craigfort get back on its feet.

Craigfort's parent, Faxhill Homes, controlled by Kildare builder Jack Tierney, was in receivership. However, Craigfort, which included Lawlors Hotel, also in Naas, was rescued as its businesses were shown to have viable futures.

The Killashee is a popular wedding venue as well as drawing guests from local business-

es, Punchestown racecourse and the bloodstock industry. The 19th-century manor previously served as a boarding school.

Tetrarch is building "aparthotels" – serviced apartment buildings that offer short-term stays with hotel-style bookings – and a budget hotel in Dublin city centre.

The business owns offices on the capital's northside, several of which it rents to State bodies, including the Garda Ombudsman.

## PCRE to spend €140m on developing six solar farms

CHARLIE TAYLOR

Irish solar photovoltaic cell developer Power Capital Renewable Energy (PCRE) is to invest €140 million in six ready-to-build solar farms with a combined capacity in excess of 240 megawatts.

The move comes after it acquired the solar farm sites from Renewable Energy Systems (RES) for an undisclosed sum in a move that brings its total portfolio to over 1.1 gigawatts. The deal, which comes in addition to a €200 million investment announced earlier this year, cements PCRE's position as one of the largest independent solar power producers in the State.  
The solar farm sites ac-

quired from RES are in several counties including Galway, Waterford, Clare and Kildare, and come complete with planning permissions from local councils and grid connections from ESB and Eirgrid.

**Auction**

The company intends to submit some of these assets into the upcoming Renewable Electricity Support Scheme auction and will also continue to seek corporate customers looking to reduce their CO<sub>2</sub> footprint by entering "power purchase agreements", it said.

"This is a major statement of our ambitions in Ireland. We know RES have a great track record in developing renewable energy projects in Ire-

land and we hope to do further deals with the RES team in the future," said PCRE co-founder Justin Brown.

Omnes, a French private equity and infrastructure investor with €5 billion in assets under management, took a majority stake in PCRE late last year. With Omnes's backing, PCRE is focused on building a significant solar PV portfolio in Ireland, with plans to be the dominant player in the sector locally over the next decade.

In July, the company announced plans to spend about €200 million on building out assets it acquired from Irish firm Terra Solar.

PCRE, which was founded in 2011, also operates in Britain, Germany and Greece.

## AIB agrees €65m cyber resilience deal with IBM

CHARLIE TAYLOR

AIB has signed a €65 million three-year contract with IBM to provide it with enhanced cyber resilience and fraud detection capabilities.

Under the agreement, the tech giant will provide the bank with a z15 mainframe and related services.

AIB is following in the footsteps of other financial institutions, including Britain's Nationwide and Singapore's DBS Bank, by adopting the z15 as a critical part of its mainframe modernisation efforts.

The z15 integrates hybrid cloud, data privacy and security controls, and promises a better performance and increased efficiency.

The new platform includes advanced data analytics and

process automation tools and will enable enhanced system availability capabilities.

"As we accelerate into the future of banking, we need the most advanced technology to underpin our ongoing digital transformation efforts," said Fergal Coburn, group chief technology officer at AIB.

**Innovation**  
"IBM technology has been the backbone of our service delivery for over 30 years and this agreement maintains our relationship in the innovation space.

"This will be a core contributor in ensuring that we achieve the key technology objectives that underpin our 2023 strategic ambitions and to meet the challenges faced in our industry."

### The Bottom Line

## Laura Noonan

## Nothing says 'Christmas' like the buzz of a holiday job

There are certain Christmas songs which will always take me back to the clothes shop in Dublin where I worked in my university holidays. The four winters I spent running around the floors of Next clothing, I discovered that nothing rivals the pulse of a shop as the festive season enters full swing.

Though I probably shouldn't admit it in the newspaper that now employs me, these were probably the fondest memories of my working life. Every Christmas, I briefly wish I could trade places with my teenage self.

I know my recollections of that time are hued with nostalgia. The same can be said for a Financial Times colleague who so loved his part-time job selling school uniforms in London's Peter Jones department store that he seriously considered signing up for its management trainee scheme. Witnessing the Polish uprising while on holiday whetted his appetite for global affairs, and the rest is history.

Still, the memory of £20 tips from wealthy foreigners, the joy of the store and the camaraderie with colleagues from all walks of life has never left him. "Nothing quite matched that, ever," he says, more than 40 years and many career accomplishments later.

A lot has changed since his day and mine. His part-time job came with a heavily subsidised staff bar. Mine, in the early 2000s, coincided with the headiest years of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economic boom. Holiday work was easy to come by, and customers had plenty of money to spend. As our crisis-time finance minister, the late Brian Lenihan, so memorably put it, "we all partied."

**Homeless cafes**

Today's students are not so lucky. A walk around Dublin reveals homeless people queuing for food a few doors down from the Next store where I worked. It is one of a handful of homeless cafes which have erupted across the city as the pandemic has tipped many struggling residents into poverty.

One student describes having handed out 20 CVs in recent years and only getting one response. That was before Covid. Another describes how the pandemic led to staff shortages and uncertainty about hours, amid ever-changing rules on openings.

Recent supply chain woes, which led to stripped shelves and frustrated customers, has made the mood on shop floors today very different to the one I remember.

I go to another Next store across Dublin. Less than four weeks before Christmas, there are only a handful of people in the store. The buzz of my retail past – when finding sizes, ushering people into fitting rooms, bagging up

clothes and entertaining bored children was part of so many Christmases – is notably absent.

Now, Next plc tells me, online shopping has led to a step change in how the holiday season works in retail. Next takes on "dramatically" fewer seasonal staff in high street stores than it did in my day. What was a rite of passage for many of us is becoming an increasingly rare opportunity.

Some, whose memories of Christmas counter service are less favourable than mine, might say that's no bad thing. But I will forever disagree. My favourite Christmas memory is still bound up with the camaraderie of a festive all-nighter. At Next, all staff had to work some part of Christmas Eve. The country students who wanted to get home in time for the celebratory build-up usually took a shift that began the evening of the 23rd and finished at dawn. We'd work through the night, ticketing shoes and tops and dresses for the post-Christmas sales.

I remember the boxes of Celebrations and Quality Street sweets. I remember my beloved Christmas tape blaring throughout the store. I remember how we sang, and laughed, and ate, and put red



“

**What was a rite of passage for many of us is becoming an increasingly rare opportunity**

dots on labels so we'd know what was in the sale and what wasn't.

I remember one year using some of the money I'd earned with all those holiday shifts to buy a DVD player on the way to my Christmas shift, and feeling like Santa bringing it home to my mother, sister and brother.

I remember making my way to the train station on Christmas Eve mornings when it was still dark out, and embarking on the two-hour journey to my hometown, where I'd arrive in the late morning, drunk-tired, bleary-eyed and never happier the whole rest of the year. – Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2021

## Apple TV Plus offered on Sky Q platform

LAURA SLATTERY

Sky has made Apple TV Plus available through Sky Q, meaning its pay-TV customers will be able to access the streaming service on the platform for €4.99 per month.

The streamer, which offers a free seven-day trial, includes original Apple-commissioned programming, such as comedy hit Ted Lasso, popular drama The Morning Show and science fiction series Foundation, which is made in Troy Studios in Limerick.

Sky said Apple's content would be easy to discover on its homepage and apps rail on Sky Q, while it will also feature in its top picks section alongside Sky's original shows and the content and apps of its other partners.

Apple TV Plus will be available on Sky Glass, Sky's new streaming television once these devices go on sale in Ireland from 2022, Sky Ireland said.

Apple TV Plus was launched in November 2019. The tech giant has not yet published any official subscriber numbers.