

Opening Statement by Minister Harris to the Joint Committee on Future of Mental Health Care

28 February 2018

I would like to thank the committee for the invitation to attend today's meeting. I appreciate the opportunity that this committee provides for a cross-party approach to mental health and it is very welcome that we have this forum for sharing information, and gathering input and suggestions.

This Government's ongoing commitment to mental health services is well documented. Since 2012, we have increased the HSE's Mental Health Budget by over €200 million, or 28%, with further increases to come in 2019.

Given the scale of investment in mental health it is necessary for us to ensure that the best use is made of the funds allocated. As part of our considerations in this regard we are working on developing a successor policy to A Vision For Change.

As the members of the Committee are aware, an Oversight Group has been established to look at where we are now in our mental health services, where we want to be and how we get there.

The Oversight Group will provide us with a blueprint for the provision of mental health services into the future.

The Group is currently finalising its work plan which will outline its objectives and the work completed to date. I expect that the Chair of the oversight group will shortly be in a position to share the Group's work plan with the Committee.

The text of the General Scheme of a Bill to amend the Mental Health Act is currently being prepared in my Department. This bill is a comprehensive revision of our existing legislation and I know that Oireachtas members have a very particular interest in improving legislation in this area.

You will of course be aware that we are also in the process of addressing four Private Members' bills which will propose more immediate changes to the Mental Health Act covering areas such as consent to admission, replacing "best interests" with new guiding principles, introducing safeguards regarding admissions of children to adult units, ensuring mental health has equal parity with physical health and finally ensuring that Advance Healthcare Directives apply to persons detained under mental health legislation.

Much work has also been done in the critical areas of suicide reduction and youth mental health. The Implementation Plan of the national suicide reduction strategy, “Connecting For Life”, has now been published. The strategy will be implemented on a cross-sectoral basis and will hopefully help to further decrease Irish suicide rates.

The report of the National Taskforce on Youth Mental Health was launched by my colleague Minister Jim Daly and myself in December 2017. Many of its recommended actions have been incorporated into existing service agreements with various Government Departments, the HSE and Tusla.

Other actions will be driven by a new Inter-Departmental initiative currently under consideration, the Youth Mental Health Pathfinder Project. The Pathfinder project aims for effective collaboration across three departments in the area of youth mental health – Department of Children & Youth Affairs, Department of Education & Skills and Department of Health.

While the importance of planning cannot be overstated, it is equally important that we now address any existing gap between mental health services demand and supply. With this in mind, we have taken a number of steps to increase the supply of services.

We have provided funding to increase the annual number of Psychiatric Nurse undergraduates by 130. In addition, we have introduced an Assistant Psychologist grade in Primary Care and have provided funding for 114 posts and an extra 20 Psychologists. This will help to relieve pressure on the CAMHS service, while ensuring quicker access to services for those with mental health issues.

I hope I have given a brief overview of the key points and I now welcome your comments and questions, and conclude by thanking you again for your invitation to be here today.