Improving Home Care Services in Ireland

Introductory remarks by John Dunne, Chief Executive, Family Carers Ireland to the Joint Committee on Health, Houses of the Oireachtas, 12th December, 2018.

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today on this important topic.

Family Carers Ireland (FCI) is a national charity that works to improve supports, services and recognition for anyone living with the challenges of caring for a family member or friend who is ill, frail, disabled or has mental health difficulties. We engage with over 20,000 families each year. We also deliver 350,000 hours of Home Support each year – which gives us an in-depth operational understanding of home care provision.

We are encouraged by the emerging themes which the Department of Health has abstracted from the first phase of its recent consultation on a statutory home care scheme. These themes are broadly reflective of Family Carers Ireland’s submission to the consultation process. But we believe that insufficient attention has been paid to four elements of the wider policy context.

Nature and purpose of home care
Home care needs to be recognised as integral to the sustainability of the wider health care system not a cost that has to be minimised. We believe that this would be best done by formalising lead responsibility for home care with the family, with the state in an enabling and supporting role.

Funding models
There is no doubt that a new model of funding for home care is required but we believe that we need to begin by defining what we want to fund rather than simply co-funding the current, completely inadequate system. This should also be informed by the definition of the nature and purpose of healthcare – the German model which is sometimes cited for its many impressive features is based on a sophisticated insurance scheme. Such an approach was first recommended in Ireland decades ago but no government has shown any appetite to move in that direction.

Manpower planning
We believe that the current crisis will increase markedly over the next decade unless policy reflects the fact that in order for the current level of ‘co-production’ of home care to be sustained the ratio of family carers will have to increase from one in 10 to one in 5 by 2030.
Current HSE roles and conflicts
We believe that the most immediate challenge to the improvement with home care in Ireland centres on the HSE’s ongoing conflicted roles as a service provider, commissioner and regulator of home care.

Direct provision
The extent to which HSE is a major direct provider of Home Support Services varies throughout the country – which makes consistent service planning and delivery problematic. Whilst the HSE emphasises quality in home care, when it comes to service delivery this commitment is secondary to the priority it accords to its internal industrial relations.

An effective system for dealing with grievances and complaints is essential to ensure good quality Home Care services. HSE systems in this regard are unfit for purpose. We understand that this is a direct result of arrangements set by the government which HSE senior management has requested be changed – with no result so far.

Furthermore, because of differential arrangements mandated by the HSE in regard to working conditions for directly employed staff and staff of commissioned services the hourly cost of direct provision is up to twice the cost of commissioned services at current rates – a discrepancy that is rarely acknowledged or debated.

Commissioning
Family Carers Ireland would contend that since commissioning was introduced in 2010 there has been a steady reduction in baseline quality indicators. The shift to a lowest common denominator home support specification alongside the increasingly complex cases now assigned to the home care system is a serious accident waiting to happen.

Far from saving money this year’s tender for home support services has resulted in avoidably higher costs of service because of the gaming of the scoring system that was allowed.

Regulation
HIQA was originally scheduled to have assumed responsibility for this area in 2016. The implications of failing to adhere to this timetable are not even being discussed, far less addressed, possibly because a HIQA survey in 2017 showed that 76% of respondent believed that independent regulation is already in place.

This is, inevitably, a very high level review of issues relating to improving Home Care Services in Ireland. I will be happy to expand on any or all of the points raised in the course of our discussion later.