Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting the Irish Cancer Society before the committee today. Our Head of Services Donal Buggy and I appreciate the opportunity to give you the patient perspective on the implementation of the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026.

Thirty years ago, when we first celebrated Daffodil Day, only 3 in 10 people survived cancer. Today, 6 in 10 do.

This is thanks in no small part to investment in lifesaving research - by ourselves, the HRB, Cancer Trials Ireland and others - as well as major improvements in cancer care under Ireland’s two previous national cancer strategies.

For example, the centralisation of cancer treatment, particularly surgery, into designated specialist centres has ensured patients are being treated by healthcare professionals with more experience and expertise in their particular type of cancer. Thousands of lives have been saved as a result.

However, Ireland’s cancer outcomes are still poorer than those of other EU countries.

Our third national cancer strategy set to change this by

- Improving cancer prevention;
- Increasing screening rates;
- Ensuring more cancers are diagnosed early;
- Providing an integrated model of care, so patients get the package of supports they need from multi-disciplinary teams; and
- Improving treatment, particularly in rare cancers and those with poorer outcomes.

Crucially, it recognised the importance of maximising patient involvement in their care and improving quality of life for cancer survivors.

It stressed the importance of investment in cancer research, as a key driver of innovation and a way of providing early access to life-changing drugs.

It also highlighted that sufficient support for the National Cancer Control Programme and workforce planning would be essential to delivering change.
The Irish Cancer Society was proud to sit on the Steering Committee that helped develop the strategy, under the leadership of our former chairman, Professor John Kennedy. It is a visionary document, with the needs of patients at its heart. If implemented, it would reduce the number of Irish people getting cancer and significantly improve survival and quality of life for those who do.

That’s why it’s so disappointing that there appears to be very little momentum behind its delivery. According to the implementation report published in February, 6 of 7 interim targets due to be met by the end of 2018 were missed. Even worse, the HSE’s 2019 Services Plan explicitly states that the NCCP allocation for this year “will not enable the service to match referral demands in areas such as radiotherapy, rapid access clinics and diagnostics.”

Not only have resources not been given to the NCCP to deliver the new initiatives promised in the strategy, inadequate funding has been provided to deliver existing services to a growing number of cancer patients.

This is truly shocking and will have a major impact on patients and their families.

One of the 6 missed targets was to ensure patients are diagnosed earlier, thereby increasing their chances of survival.

We recently heard from a woman whose GP had recommended she attend a breast clinic to investigate some worrying symptoms. He said her case was urgent and as such she should be seen within 2 weeks. Still waiting for an appointment, she rang our nurseline very upset. She was incredibly worried, anxious and distressed, thinking about a possible cancer growing inside her while she waited to be seen.

By the end of 2018:

- 95% of people classified as having breast cancer symptoms needing ‘urgent’ investigation were meant to be seen within two weeks. Less than 75% were.
- 9 out of 10 patients with certain cancers were to have surgery within the timelines set out in the strategy. Only 7 out of 10 did.
- 9 out of 10 patients starting radiotherapy treatment were meant to do so within 15 working days of being ready to treat. Just over 8 in 10 did.

Every missed target affects real people. The mother with a lump in her breast. The father who had blood in his urine that won’t go away. The healthcare professional trying to do their best in a chaotic system.
Publication of the Strategy was a step forward. Underfunding and underperformance are two steps back.

One in two of us will be diagnosed with cancer. When we are, we deserve the best. We deserve the standard of care promised in the 2017 National Cancer Strategy.

Unless action is taken now, this will not happen. Instead, with more cancer patients and insufficient resources, standards will slip.

Please help us ensure the Strategy is delivered by pushing for:

- A more detailed implementation plan, with adequate funding to meet targets, including the big infrastructural and capital projects called out in the Strategy;
- Increased investment in cancer research, including clinical trials;
- A clear plan and timeline for the delivery of at least one Comprehensive Cancer Centre;
- Completion of the centralisation programme;
- Action to fill gaps in data and baseline figures so implementation of the strategy can be properly monitored.

Your constituents, your friends, your families and your communities deserve nothing less.

Thank you.