

## **Speech to Joint Oireachtas Committee on *Report of the Independent Review Group on the Role of Voluntary organisations in Health and Social Services.***

**10 July 2019**

**The Wheel's contribution will be delivered by Ivan Cooper, Director of Public Policy at the Wheel and Austin O Sullivan Director of Resources for WALK.**

Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to speak to you today on the topic of the *Report of the Independent Review Group on the role of voluntary organisations in health and social services.*

As Director of Public Policy for The Wheel, I am delighted to have the opportunity to present our position on the subject. I am joined today by Austin O'Sullivan, Director of Resources for WALK, a longstanding member of The Wheel.

Members of the Committee, before introducing you to The Wheel, let me say right up front that The Wheel strongly supports the recommendations made in the IRG Report.

We believe their implementation will bring us closer to an optimised health service focused on maximizing individual and community health. The recommendations, when implemented, will enable community and voluntary organisations that work in partnership with statutory funders to maximise the responsiveness and innovation they can bring to services.

The Wheel is Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises, with over 1,600 member organisations, who together employ over 35,000 people and involve over 45,000 volunteers in delivering services and supports every day right across the country.

At least 150 of our members are funded through provisions of the Health Act (sections 38 and 39) by the HSE. They are among more than 800 organisations funded by the HSE to deliver services, forming a key part of our national health and personal social service infrastructure. These organisations support people to live independent lives and to realize their potential. These include people with disabilities and medical conditions as well as older people and children. Indeed, many were first established through the initiative and advocacy of self-organising communities when no statutory services were provided.

Despite the longstanding role many have played, these organisations are facing challenges which limit or in some cases prevent them from carrying out their vital work. These include:

- Inadequate budgets and annual funding structures that don't facilitate long-term service-development;
- An increasingly demanding general regulatory environment which is diverting time and resources away from front-line services;
- A compliance and reporting system that is increasingly oriented towards financial compliance rather than effective service-outcomes;

- Relationships with the HSE which are becoming increasingly contract-determined rather than collaborative;
- Commissioning and contracting processes that put community and voluntary providers at an inherent disadvantage when compared to private sector providers.

In many cases, these trends are resulting in an inability to meet service demands and maintain the responsive, innovative and person-centered approach that characterizes the sector.

The Report proposes a range of practical and urgently-needed solutions which would address these issues and improve the relationship between the state and the sector to ensure better outcomes for all. The authors listened attentively and took a great deal of care in reaching balanced conclusions, which, in addition to addressing these issues, identified many areas for improvement in the practice of community and voluntary organisations. Although these changes will present challenges, I can assure you the sector will not shrink from them.

Key recommendations that we would like to bring to the attention of the Committee include:

- Implementing a forum for regular dialogue between relevant departments and the sector
- A charter for a new relationship focused on collaboratively developing world-class services;
- Agreement of essential services to be fully-funded and mapped throughout the country;
- Simplification of service agreements and avoidance of duplication in reporting;
- Multi-annual budgeting to enable organisations to plan long term;
- A system to manage deficits; and
- Provision of governance training and supports for smaller organisations.

Finally, The Wheel believes that the Forum on the IRG report, which is now in the initial stages of planning, offers a very valuable structure to advance and implement the Report's recommendations. This will be a key means to renew trust and improve collaborative working between all stakeholders. The terms of reference for the Forum should be transparent and open to consultation from representatives of organisations delivering services.

I will now pass to my colleague, Austin O Sullivan, Director of Resources for WALK.

WALK, founded in 1967, is a section 39 HSE-funded charity based in Dublin, providing community-based supports to 370 adults with intellectual disabilities and autism. WALK employs 205 staff.

WALK receives an annual grant from the HSE to provide its core services. Up to 2008, in addition to this core grant, WALK also received additional grants for salary increments and staff pensions.

Commencing in 2008 WALK has had cumulative cuts of €3.2m to its core funding, combined with no increment or pension payments since 2009. WALK has additional costs of HIQA compliance of €187,270 capital plus annual operational costs of €227,923.

These cuts have a serious impact on a number of areas of our work:

- **Service user safety and quality of life:** Due to lack of funding we have been unable to adequately staff support services which has resulted in risks to service user safety. These risks have been fully documented and communicated to the HSE. WALK continues to operate with high levels of risks in its front line services. In addition to these risks, WALK is aware that the lack of funding has had a direct impact on service user quality of life. This is most

noticeable in incompatible placements of people in residential services and the lack of personalised supports to enable people to achieve their life goals. The issue of changing needs is also relevant and poses a risk to the individual and the organisation.

- **Lack of pay restoration:** WALK staff earn on average 23% less than similar staff in section 38 and HSE funded services.  
Attrition of experienced staff is running at 18% for 2018. This has a further impact on the quality of services provided.
- **Threatened industrial action:** In 2014, St Aidan's, a similar section-39-funded agency received a ruling in the Labour Court that they were liable to pay increments to staff backdated to 2009. On the back of this WALK staff have commenced the process for a similar claim.
- **Unsustainable organisation deficit:** Successive deficits have left us in a precarious financial position.

I will now pass back to Ivan Cooper for closing comments.

The recommendations which I outlined earlier are achievable, and we look forward to working in partnership with the Oireachtas, Government, the Department of Health, The HSE and other departments and agencies to ensure we have a world class health and social service system worthy of an Ireland that values those most in need of support.