

Opening Statement of the CEO of Irish Wheelchair Association to the Oireachtas Committee on Health, 21st November 2019

INTRODUCTION

On behalf of Irish Wheelchair Association, I wish to thank the Committee for the invitation to present and the opportunity to answer questions regarding the background to the decision to close the Cuisle facility in Roscommon and the consequent transition to a new hotel-based model of holiday respite service for people with physical disabilities.

I am joined by Irish Wheelchair Association's National Director for Services, Tony Cunningham.

Irish Wheelchair Association has a vision of an Ireland where people with disabilities enjoy equal rights, choices and opportunities in how they live their lives, and where our country is a model worldwide for a truly inclusive society.

Irish Wheelchair Association is a leading representative organisation and service provider for people with physical disabilities, with 20,000 members, over 2,500 employees, 57 local community centres and 2,000 volunteers.

For almost 60 years, Irish Wheelchair Association has pioneered the development and delivery of innovative, quality assured services to people with physical disabilities and has continually advocated for greater access to society on behalf of our membership.

Irish Wheelchair Association is a major provider of services to the HSE under the mandate of the Service Arrangements process. In 2018, Irish Wheelchair Association received €41.7m from the HSE towards delivering over 2 million hours of services nationally including Assisted Living Services, Resource & Outreach Centres, Respite and Supported Living. The funding received from the HSE for these services does not fully cover the associated costs of delivering those services and in 2018, Irish Wheelchair Association contributed €1.87m from its own unrestricted operating income in order to maintain those services.

In June of this year, this Committee was briefed by a number of disability service provider umbrella groups on the growing funding crisis in the disability sector. In this context, during the period 2008 to 2018, Irish Wheelchair Association has seen its financial reserves diminish by €5.7m as our organisation has used its own funds to ensure continuity of service provision across all our services. Irish Wheelchair Association's cash balances at the end of 2018 represented just 4 weeks operating costs.

Irish Wheelchair Association is a registered charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee governed by a voluntary board. The majority of

board members are elected from IWA's membership at the Annual General Meeting and at least a third of all members must be, and are, persons with physical disability.

BACKGROUND TO CUISLE DECISION

For 22 years, Cuisle has been a core part of Irish Wheelchair Association as well as the community in Donamon, providing employment and social opportunities for people in the locality, as well as providing accessible holiday and respite for people with physical disabilities, particularly at a time when Cuisle first opened and when there were little or no alternatives for people with physical disabilities.

The Board and Management of Irish Wheelchair Association understand and share the sadness of those who visit and work in Cuisle at the news that the facility will not reopen in 2020.

The difficult decision to close the Cuisle building has not come easily and was made by the Board of Irish Wheelchair Association on October 18th last following over 2 years of trying to find an alternative solution.

The building, which is not owned by Irish Wheelchair Association and the lease on which expires in 2026, is in need of significant repair works including full electrical installation and fire safety upgrades,

which will cost in the region of €1.15 million at a minimum. We are aware that there is asbestos in the building and there is a high risk that if this is disturbed during construction that the cost of necessary remedial works could escalate significantly.

Irish Wheelchair Association does not have the funds to pay for these essential upgrades, which are vital to keeping the leased building open for respite.

During the period 2017 to 2019, there were a number of board visits to Cuisle and a full meeting of the board took place in Cuisle during 2017. Also, during this period, Cuisle was discussed at 14 of 21 Irish Wheelchair Association Board Meetings.

In March 2018, Irish Wheelchair Association commenced implementation of a new social enterprise business model for Cuisle and invested from its own funds to generate new income for Cuisle as demonstration of its commitment to continuing to provide services there, subject to the funds to pay for the essential upgrade works becoming available.

For over 2 years, Irish Wheelchair Association has engaged extensively with public representatives and funders but unfortunately there is no funding available to complete the essential capital works and no viable alternative has been proposed to Irish Wheelchair Association by any third party.

The Board of Irish Wheelchair Association has a legal obligation to ensure the safety of everyone who stays in Cuisle and therefore had no choice but to make the decision to close the building at the end of November. Cuisle usually closes for December to February annually due to limited bookings during this period.

Irish Wheelchair Association acknowledges the loss of employment associated with the closure of Cuisle and the impact on the local community. We are grateful to the staff for their commitment and dedication to the Cuisle-based service and the local community for their support over many years.

Over the past number of weeks, Irish Wheelchair Association has been in discussion with Cuisle staff and their representatives. All staff have received an “expressions of interests” letter and form, the purpose of which is to capture their preferences with regard to redundancy or redeployment. At time of writing, 19th November, 25 of 42 staff have returned this form with 24 choosing redundancy and 1 staff member opting for redeployment. Irish Wheelchair Association has written to all impacted staff with an estimate of their redundancy entitlement in accordance with the terms of the redundancy package agreed on their behalf with SIPTU.

Irish Wheelchair Association will write again to Cuisle staff with a final calculation of their redundancy entitlement when any corrections or amendments have been made following the circulation of the

redundancy estimates letters. A small number of staff will remain in employment at Cuisle for two to four weeks after November 29th to assist with the closure.

Future use of the Cuisle facility will be a matter for the owners of the building. Irish Wheelchair Association assumes that any future use will be contingent on completion of the required capital works.

NEW SERVICE MODEL

In response to the difficult decision to close the Cuisle facility, and in order to ensure continued provision of holiday respite breaks, Irish Wheelchair Association will commence its new holiday service in the West of Ireland that will provide accessible hotel holidays into the future, and plans to provide a wide range of choice to people with disabilities seeking to take a supported respite holiday in the West of Ireland by partnering with fully accessible hotels. This new and innovative service will commence in March 2020 in collaboration with the HSE. Cuisle ordinarily closes between December and February, which means there will be limited impact to guests during that period.

Our new holiday service will provide people with a modern, inclusive, hotel break in a range of locations with easy access to local towns and a wider choice of amenities. It will also enable people with disabilities to take an enjoyable holiday with friends or family in the same hotel as chosen by them from a selection of options.

Irish Wheelchair Association has been operating comparable hotel holiday breaks in Kilkenny since 2018 and has received positive feedback from our guests. This service was also shortlisted for an Irish Healthcare Centre award in 2019. Samples of the feedback we have received include:

“Staff excellent, food excellent; feel equal going on holidays with everyone else.”

“I no longer feel like people with disabilities are in a box.”

“It’s all excellent. You give us a great holiday not just respite.”

Irish Wheelchair Association has developed a range of holiday respite options for all our guests, regardless of their level of support requirement, i.e. low, medium or high level support. Irish Wheelchair Association will provide support to guests on a tailored, individual basis. We will ensure guests have everything they need including fully accessible en-suite bedrooms, specialised beds, aids and appliances, hoists, support with medication management and clinical tasks and Irish Wheelchair Association staffed skilled personal assistance service, 24/7. Irish Wheelchair Association’s fully accessible transport can be arranged during holiday breaks and will be available to provide transport to activities and events in the community. An information sheet included with documents submitted has been distributed and explained to our members through engagement meetings which have

been taking place at our Resource and Outreach centres right around the country.

Irish Wheelchair Association and HSE representatives were invited by Minister McGrath to meet on Tuesday 12th of November in order to provide the necessary reassurances in respect of what is fundamentally a progressive and innovative way to meet the needs of people with a disability that wish to avail of holiday respite breaks, and to bridge the gap that will arise from the closure of Cuisle. Irish Wheelchair Association stressed to Minister McGrath that the clear choice and preference of people with disabilities is increasingly more about having access to fully inclusive settings and where existing commercial hotel provider settings implement universal design initiatives to accommodate people of all levels of abilities.

It goes without saying that the new model of service will be different and will be a big change for those who have loved going to Cuisle. We are optimistic, based on the feedback from those who have availed of the Kilkenny service, that as time goes on and people get a chance to experience this form of holiday/respite break, then they will see the benefits of enjoying this form of break.

Irish Wheelchair Association has a 60-year track record of ensuring our services meet the wants and needs of our members and we will continue to adapt and innovate to ensure that this remains true into the future.

Thank you all for listening. Tony and I welcome any questions the Committee may have.