

**Opening Statement****Mr. Robert Watt Secretary General, Department of Health****Committee of Public Accounts****Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

As Accounting Officer for the Department of Health's Vote 38, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the 2020 Annual Report and Appropriation Account of the Comptroller and Auditor General. I am joined by my colleagues, Mr. Kevin Colman and Mr. John O'Grady, from the Resources division and Ms Fiona Larthwell from the Social Care Division in my department. I will now set out the main points of the 2020 accounts as they pertain to Vote 38.

The initial 2020 net provision, current and capital, for Vote 38 was €17.901 billion, which consisted of a gross provision of €18.331 billion and Appropriations-in-Aid of €430 million. As the scale of the challenge presented by Covid-19 became clear, it was evident that unprecedented action was needed here in Ireland to prevent

- the spread of infection,
- high rates of hospitalisation and intensive care unit admissions, and
- significant mortality.

New structures and processes were put in place between this Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the HSE to facilitate timely decision-making while also ensuring that high levels of governance were maintained where the HSE reported to the Department each week on the estimated Covid-19 related non-capital and capital expenditure that had been incurred to date.

Additional funding of €1.997 billion was voted to the Department in a revised estimate in June 2020 to support the measures outlined in the National Action Plan on Covid-19. This represented the expenditure approved by the Government for Covid-19 measures taken up to the date of the passing of the revised estimate.

A further net supplementary estimate of €514.5 million was approved to meet additional funding requirements that arose up to the end of 2020. This resulted in a net overall provision for Vote 38 of €20.442 billion, incorporating a deferred capital surrender of €30 million carried over from the previous year.

The 2020 outturn was €20.3 billion, leaving an overall surplus of €120 million. The Department of Health received sanction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to carry forward €68.2 million of unspent allocations in respect of the capital elements of subhead M.2 to 2021.

The pandemic has been an extremely difficult time for our front-line workers across the health service. They have responded with resilience, agility and a level of commitment which has been extraordinary. With the support of the Department, the HSE has introduced new capabilities and innovations across the system. These include implementing e-prescribing in general practice and introducing alternative care pathways and new models of care.

An example of the innovation of the health service was seen in responding to COVID-19 last year. New testing and contact tracing capability was implemented

with the delivery of 720,000 GP referrals, 2.3 million laboratory tests and over 440,000 contact tracing calls during the year.

We have implemented a hugely successful COVID-19 vaccination strategy with one of the highest levels of uptake in Europe and we are making very strong progress in delivering booster vaccines across the population at present.

Further investment in the overall reform of our Health system includes very significant investments in clinical strategies such as the Cancer, Gynaecological and Maternity strategy coupled with an unprecedented investment to address the shortcomings identified by the 2018 Capacity Review which has seen us deliver the largest increase in our acute and critical care beds and also in our community beds in decades.

Allied to increasing acute capacity, we are also undertaking a critical “shift left” in moving care out of acute settings and into the community with the recruitment of an additional workforce of over 3,000 staff to fully roll out Community Health Networks across every community in Ireland.

The Department has continued to successfully discharge its other functions. Importantly, we seek to frame policies and legislation to promote health. The life expectancy in Ireland is 82.8 years, which is above the OECD average of 81 years. However, with the prevalence of preventable non-communicable diseases, it is hugely important to promote healthy behaviours and prevent ill-health. Under the Healthy Ireland umbrella, which is the Government of Ireland initiative, we work cross-sectorally to achieve this objective.

We also support the Minister and Ministers of State in their work including their legislative priorities and their public and parliamentary accountability. For example, in 2020, the Department processed over 9,224 parliamentary questions, representing 24% of all parliamentary questions tabled to Ministers across Government.

The Department continues to enhance its governance and performance oversight in respect the services and reform being delivered by the HSE. In line with Sláintecare, legislation was enacted in 2019 to introduce new accountability structures in the HSE with the formal appointment of a non-executive, competency-based governing board. In recognition of these new structures, the Department put in place a revised engagement model with the HSE and its Board, with a view to strengthening the oversight of governance and performance management and accountability of the HSE. This oversight model is operational and will continue to be improved and enhanced as necessary to ensure there is more effective oversight within the Department.

This governance improvement work continues. The Government has committed to bringing forward Regional Health Areas. A Business Case for the Implementation of Regional Health Areas been developed by the Department. The HSE has provided positive feedback and implementation considerations on this Business Case. A memorandum on the next steps for RHA implementation is being drafted. I anticipate that the Minister will bring this to Government for decision in January 2022.

To ensure that we have frontline and expert input as we move forward, the Minister has established an Advisory Group. Given this progress, the Minister

has informed the Hospital Group Boards that they are being stood down this month as their terms of office expire.

There are many reforms and improvements taking place which are providing better healthcare to our citizens. Together with our colleagues in the HSE we are focused on further reforms in 2022.

Finally, I would like to thank the wonderful staff in the Department of Health for their ongoing commitment and dedication.

I look forward to continuing to work with the committee and with the Oireachtas and am happy to take any questions.

ENDS.