

## **Opening Statement**

**Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach**

**Stephen Donnelly, TD**

**Minister for Health**

**Thursday 22 June 2023**

Good morning, Chairperson and Members. Thank you for the invitation to meet with the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach to discuss this topic.

I would like to once more express my gratitude to Ms. Maura Quinn who agreed to undertake this work on a pro bono basis.

The aim of Ms. Quinn's work was to 'determine learnings from the process related to the proposed secondment of the Chief Medical Officer and associated research proposal'. Ms Quinn was also asked to make recommendations that could inform future such initiatives.

As I have said on previous occasions, and as the report makes clear, the proposed secondment "would have served both the Government and the Department of Health's interest in, and focus on, public health collaboration."

It is clear to me that all of those who became involved in this process did so in good faith. They did so with the intention of retaining for the public service the unique expertise of the former Chief Medical Officer, who served the state so well throughout the pandemic.

Ms. Quinn concluded that the proposed secondment "required a longer lead time to ensure that all the various elements had been considered, discussed and prepared for and to ensure that there was proper stakeholder consultation and communication throughout the process". I agree.

She also noted that the Department of Health had come through an extremely difficult two years given we had been managing a pandemic.

Ms. Quinn said it was clear that all staff were under enormous pressure, coupled with a demanding workload. As Minister, I have seen the huge demands on, and large workload of, my senior officials – and indeed those right across the Department of Health.

Nonetheless, and as Ms Quinn pointed out, “rather than trying to progress this proposed secondment in an extremely tight timeline, it required detailed consideration, review and discussion.”

Notwithstanding the intense pressure officials involved were under, and their concerns about confidentiality, as I have said previously, it is a matter of regret that I was not informed at an earlier stage of the details of the proposed secondment.

While it was clearly intended by all parties involved that the rigour of the Health Research Board be brought to any such funding, the fact that consultation had not happened at this point in the process led to much confusion in public commentary and the perception, at least, that this was not the intention.

I accept that no attempt was made to conceal the nature of the agreement with Trinity College Dublin in relation to the proposed secondment. Indeed, those details were put into the public domain after this information was provided by the Department of Health, as the report makes clear.

As I said when the report was published, I have written to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to see whether there is a need to bring further clarity to the guidelines for secondments between the civil and public service.

This report draws a line under this episode at a time when we have been engaged in an unprecedented expansion and reform of, and investment in, our health services.

It also led to the loss of the former CMO to the public service. As I have previously said, this is something that I regret greatly and indeed is deeply regretted by all who care for our health service.

We will learn the lessons set out in this report and implement the recommendations.

I’m happy to take any questions that the committee may have.

Ends.