

Joint Committee on Health

OPENING STATEMENT

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Good morning Chairman and members. Thank you for your invitation to meet with the Joint Committee on Health today.

As members are aware, during 2020 the Irish Health Service has faced unprecedented pressures as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the NPHET decision of 27 March, many non-urgent healthcare services were reduced or suspended. In recent months we have focused on restoring these services as far as possible, delivering care in very different ways, in different settings, maximising opportunities from technology.

Many of the service changes made this year in the context of COVID-19 align fully with the vision and direction of travel set out in Sláintecare. But there remains much to do if we are to effect the complete transformation of services that is required.

The OECD Country Health Profile of 2019 noted that, in comparison with other countries, Ireland has made positive progress in life expectancy, but some members of our community still experience worse outcomes than others; we consume too much alcohol and do not maintain healthy weights; accessibility to services is an issue and we have a lower per population number of practising doctors than elsewhere.

We must achieve better health outcomes for everyone, recognising where we are falling behind, focusing our efforts on reversing these trends and accelerating the digitisation of our health service.

A key principle of Sláintecare is the right of patients to timely access to all health and social care services according to clinical need. In addition to the recent impact of COVID-19, increasing pressures have been placed on our services for a number of

years as a result of population growth, increasing incidence of chronic diseases and an ageing population. As well as needing the right people and the right infrastructure – buildings, equipment and technology – to deliver the right services, we need to recalibrate and remodel how we deliver services.

Consistent with Sláintecare, we are seeking to shift the delivery of care from hospital to community settings, with a greater emphasis on prevention and remaining healthy and well.

Our aim is to sustainably address long waiting times for scheduled care services and long waits in Emergency Departments, particularly for older people and those who have more complex needs. We must reduce bed occupancy levels in hospitals. And we must reduce our reliance on community residential models of care, expanding our primary and community care services to enable our aging population to maintain their independence and live well in the community, delivering care as close as possible to patients' homes.

While we anticipate that the continued management of COVID-19 and the restarting and delivery of core services will be a primary focus for the next 12 to 18 months, the wider transformation of services must occur in parallel in order to emerge stronger from the pandemic and build upon the positive changes we have seen across our health system this year.

The implementation of the recommendations in the 2018 PA Consulting Group Health Service Capacity Review has been agreed by the Department of Health and the HSE as the starting point for developing our capacity across community and acute services while in parallel reducing bed demand and improving the health of the population.

The Capacity Review identifies the need for significant increases in capacity across a range of acute and community services. Consistent with this, we have made investments in a range of community and acute services including:

- Additional home support and enhanced home support packages
- Community Healthcare Networks and Community Specialist Teams
- GP Diagnostics
- Community based rehabilitation and step-down beds
- Acute bed capacity.

The very welcome investment for the health service announced in yesterday's Budget should allow further significant increases in capacity during 2021.

Closing

Working closely with Laura Magahy and other Departmental colleagues, the implementation of Sláintecare will continue to feature very prominently in the work of the HSE, in all of our planning processes and also in our operational decisions. It is clear that we will be living with COVID-19 and its impacts for quite some time to come. Our experience across the last number of months however demonstrates that we are capable of driving positive change and innovating in response to unprecedented challenges. We are living in extraordinary time where, despite the challenges the pandemic presents, there are huge opportunities to make real change happen for patients.

Thank you