

**Joint Committee of Health
National Maternity Hospital
14th July 2021
Opening Statement for Minister Donnelly**

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the new National Maternity Hospital. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this critical and nationally important project in front of the Committee.

I think it is fair to say that every member of this Committee shares the same goal – that is the delivery of the best possible healthcare for women and babies.

This Government has set out its stall in that regard by committing to improving women’s healthcare across the board. This year, we are providing significant investment in services, and driving a renewed focus on maternity care to realise the vision of the National Maternity Strategy. The funding allocated in Budget 2021 includes 7.3 million specifically for the implementation of the National Maternity Strategy. This is the single biggest investment in the Strategy since its publication in 2016 – and is almost five times what was allocated in 2020.

Improving women’s healthcare is a priority for me. The additional funding allows us to hire more staff. It facilitates the further development of community midwifery and specialist services.

Some of the positive initiatives happening across the system include:

- an expansion of the endometriosis centre at Tallaght University Hospital
- the expansion of existing and setting up of new “see and treat” gynaecology clinics

- the setting up of two new regional fertility hubs
- funding to hire 24 additional lactation consultants
- funding for a GP Clinical Lead for Women's Health

It is, unfortunately, an inescapable fact that many of our maternity hospitals are housed in antiquated buildings that are no longer fit for purpose. This is unfair on women. It is unfair on babies. And it is unfair on our hardworking staff.

I worry that these facts have been somewhat lost in the recent debate.

In a letter that was published in the Irish Times recently, a group of 42 senior clinicians expressed concern that misinformation and misunderstanding could delay what they described as a “vital project to create a world-class maternity hospital for the women and babies of Ireland.”

Professor Mary Higgins, a well-known consultant gynaecologist and obstetrician who works at the National Maternity Hospital and campaigned in favour of Repeal, wrote recently about just how badly we need this hospital.

“We say on a near daily basis what a difference this will make to the people we care for,” she wrote, adding it is a “fantastic project.”

We must not lose sight of this.

That said, and as I have stated publicly, it is my preference to own the land on which the new national maternity hospital will be built.

The State's core objectives are firstly to provide a world-class facility and ensure all clinically appropriate services that are legally

permissible are provided for women who need them. We must also protect the State's investment.

The proposed corporate and clinical governance arrangements for the new NMH at Elm Park were set out in the Mulvey Agreement. This was finalised following an extensive mediation process between the NMH and the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group, and brought to Government in 2017. Following on from the Mulvey Agreement, a draft legal framework has been developed which aims to copperfasten these arrangements and work is ongoing in relation to this.

I have been very clear that I will not be bringing any proposal to Government unless it provides assurances around all legally permissible services being provided in the new NMH, as well as affirming that the State's investment is safeguarded.

There has been further engagement with stakeholders in the NMH project, as we move toward finalisation of legal arrangements.

I want to reiterate that this Government remains fully committed to the development of maternity and women's health services in this country. The relocation of the National Maternity Hospital is a very significant part of this work. We remain committed to providing the highest quality infrastructure and environment, to facilitate the delivery of a modern, safe, quality maternity service for women and infants over many years to come.