

Opening Statement

Mr. Robert Watt, Secretary General, Department of Health

Joint Committee on Health

Wednesday 4th May 2022

Good morning, Chairman and members. Thank you for the invitation to meet with the Committee on Health. I am joined today by Dr Tony Holohan Chief Medical Officer.

While lessons learned exercises on the pandemic are underway throughout the world, it can be seen from objective data relating to mortality, hospitalisation and vaccination uptake, that the response to the pandemic in Ireland was among the best in the world.

The Lancet recently published a major global review of excess mortality during the pandemic with data from countries and sub-national regions throughout the world. It found that “some countries.... such as Iceland, Norway, Ireland, and Cyprus, had some of the lowest rates [of excess mortality] in the world, at less than 50 deaths per 100 000 (the rate in Ireland was 12.5 per 100,000 population).

The cumulative rate of recorded COVID-19 deaths per million population in Ireland remained consistently below the EU-27 average throughout the pandemic.

Nonetheless we have seen over 7,000 deaths from COVID, as well as high levels of illness. Both the societal and economic consequences of the last two years are well known to the committee, with the pandemic costing the Irish Exchequer circa €40 billion to date.

In the context of such costs, it is right that Governments and health systems around the world are now investing significantly in public health capacity building.

In the Department of Health, we are working to find new and innovative ways to refocus and strengthen Public Health capacity. A clear component of this is to develop leadership capacity in Public Health in order to strengthen and prepare in the event of future pandemics and indeed this is set out in the Programme for Government.

As I set out previously, I had initial discussions with the CMO in August 2021 regarding his future plans, as did the Secretary to the Government. Given the changing disease profile and concerns relating to emerging variants, these discussions were necessarily paused until earlier this year, when disease indicators confirmed that Ireland was in a better epidemiological position.

At that point, and in the context of Ireland's future pandemic preparedness, the CMO raised, with some third level institutions, how the Department of Health could, in an innovative and responsive manner, strengthen the

knowledge and practice of public health leadership. These engagements had particular regard to public health protection - informing policy making, understanding the role of public communications and behaviour change and research of relevance to these domains.

Over the course of these engagements, the proposal for a Professorship emerged, the purpose of which was to ensure that Dr Holohan's experience and skillset remained within the public service, with a view to strengthening public health capacity and leadership in Ireland.

In this role the Department's intention was for Dr Holohan to lead the development and activities of collaboration between all universities and the health sector and to develop stronger links with the WHO and agencies of the EU.

On February 25th the CMO requested my support to progress a secondment to a Dublin University. He indicated that he had informed the Secretary to the Government of this request. In early March, the Secretary to the Government spoke to me and I confirmed that I was working on the details of this arrangement, including the proposed research funding element.

I was aware that the Government had recently endorsed particular secondment arrangements to the university sector for senior civil servants. Given his long and distinguished service, and the crucial knowledge and ability he brought to bear in the pandemic, I felt it was equally important that Dr Holohan's expertise be retained and utilised in the public sector.

Further discussions took place, and the Department issued a letter of intent to Trinity College on March 16th which set out the main draft details of the proposals, with further detail on secondment arrangements etc. to be agreed between the relevant HR Departments of Trinity College and the Department of Health.

As part of these proposed arrangements, the Department considered that the funding of Dr Holohan's post was something that needed to be worked out, but that the Department would support the development of this innovative approach to progressing an important initiative through dedicated additional research funding.

It was envisaged that this would involve competitive funding organised appropriately, to support the spirit of the initiative outlined above. The letter of intent therefore provided for Dr Holohan's salary to be paid, in time, as part of a wider fund which, it was envisaged, could be administered by the Health Research Board, with details to be agreed between all three parties, as per the well-established practice of funding of health research in the third level sector.

As the Committee is aware, there are a number of well-recognised steps from the generation of an idea to the funding of a specific project or service that all Departments and Ministers must follow in order to allocate funds. It was clear to me that this proposal was in line with the Government's commitment to investing in public health, as outlined in the Programme for Government. As such, and as required, funding of research in this regard by the Department

would form part of the normal Estimates process, subject to Ministerial and Cabinet approval.

It is a matter of regret to me that, what I viewed as an important and innovative proposal for increasing our public health capacity in Ireland, is not now going ahead. I believe that this important work would have benefited greatly by being led by Dr Holohan.

I believed when we conceived this proposal that it was essential that we continued to harness Dr Holohan's knowledge and skills in the public interest and I regret that this will no longer be possible.

I am happy to answer any questions from Committee members.

Thank you.

ENDS.