

Joint Health Committee

OPENING STATEMENT

Robert Morton
Director National Ambulance Service
HSE

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Chairperson and Members, thank you for the invitation to attend today's meeting to discuss the National Ambulance Service. I am joined today by my colleagues:

- Prof. Cathal O'Donnell, Clinical Director, NAS
- Mr William Merriman, Director of Operations, NAS

The HSE's National Ambulance Service (NAS) operates from over 100 locations throughout Ireland and its services are delivered by over 2,000 staff members.

NAS operates under the HSE's 'Performance Accountability Framework', which sets out the means by which the service is held to account for its performance in relation to access to services and the quality and safety of those services. NAS clinical governance is provided by a full time Clinical Director who is supported by a number of other senior clinicians.

We submitted in advance of the meeting a briefing note which focuses on the areas of recruitment and retention and performance.

The NAS, through the HSE National Recruitment Service (NRS), continued to actively recruit new staff throughout 2022 and launched a rolling advertising campaign for Qualified Paramedics, Student Paramedics and Intermediate Care Operatives in March 2022. The campaign for Student Paramedics was successful and the NAS College was oversubscribed for the September 2022 intake of Student Paramedics which saw 90 students in college campuses in Tallaght, Ballinasloe and Tullamore.

The second round of the Student Paramedic campaign for 2022 closed for applications on 5 September 2022 and 85 new Student Paramedics began training with NAS on 19 December 2022.

In 2022, the NAS had 209 new staff start in 2022 with the majority of those (181) being in Patient and Clinical Care (Emergency Medical Technicians, Intermediate Care Operatives and Ambulance Officers). This compares favourably with an average of 10 leavers per month which includes retirements and colleagues securing promotional opportunities in the wider HSE.

The Student Paramedic recruitment campaign for 2023 commenced on the 16 January 2023 while remaining panelists from the previous campaigns are being offered opportunities to take up 128 Student Paramedic places on our BSc. in Paramedic Studies programme in September 2023, including at a proposed new educational site in Cork.

Estimates planning for 2024 is already well underway which includes plans for a fifth educational site in either Wexford or Sligo to expand our educational capacity further.

To support staff retention, the NAS has developed the NAS HR People Plan 2022 – 2025. The overarching purpose of this plan is to enhance employee experience, optimise the NAS working environment and meet expectations of health policy in Ireland.

Through working in partnership with our workforce, NAS has introduced changes to the Deployment Model which reflect the reality of current capacity challenges but seek to reduce crew travel times, reduce late finishes and improve access to rest breaks. Staff feedback on this work has been positive.

A key issue for many staff is the location of their assignment. Therefore, in 2022, NAS has introduced a policy of assigning staff to a location within 45km of their home address which has been well received by trade union partners.

National aggregate response times targets for these calls are set out in the HSE's National Service Plan each year and are described as Purple or ECHO (Life threatening cardiac or respiratory arrest) or Red / DELTA (life threatening illness or injury, other than cardiac arrest). These calls account for approximately 48% of all 999 calls. In the case of the lower acuity 999 calls, these can be further triaged through our Clinical Hub by clinicians to establish if sending an emergency ambulance is appropriate compared to other options such as self-care, visiting a Pharmacy, a GP or GP Out of Hours Service.

In 2022, the HSE National Service Plan set national aggregate Key Performance Indicator (KPI) targets for emergency calls as follows:

- PURPLE (Echo, life-threatening cardiac or respiratory arrest) - 80% in 18 minutes, 59 seconds
- RED (Delta, life-threatening illness or injury, other than cardiac or respiratory arrest) - 50% in 18 minutes, 59 seconds

As NAS response targets are national aggregate targets rather than locally based, reporting on response performance is national level only.

NAS National Figures for 2022 reflect the significant gap between demand and capacity and were:

- PURPLE/ECHO (72% in 18 minutes, 59 seconds)
- RED/DELTA (41% in 18 minutes, 59 seconds)

Further details on performance in relation to ECHO and DELTA calls over the previous two years are supplied in the briefing note.

The HSE recognises that both the HSE and Dublin City Council (DCC) have statutory powers to carry out ambulance services in Dublin. Both the Department of Health and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage have established a Task and Finish Group on behalf of the Ministers to look at any outstanding issues or areas of concern. This Group had its first meeting yesterday.

Despite the challenges of recent years, the continued investment by Government and the HSE in to the National Ambulance Service is contributing to progress on the shift to reorient healthcare away from a “hospital centric” model.

In November 2022, the HSE Board approved a new NAS Strategy that provides a roadmap for the continued development and enhancement of the National Ambulance Service in Ireland.

The NAS Strategy 2031 has been submitted to the Department of Health and is being actively considered and is expected to inform future investment decisions.

This concludes my opening statement.

Thank you.