

JCH Opening Statement

SG Robert Watt

Wednesday 14 June 2023

Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson and Members. Thank you for the invitation to meet with the Joint Committee on Health today to discuss the implementation of Sláintecare. I am joined here today by my colleagues from the Department, Ms Rachel Kenna, Chief Nursing Officer, who leads on Workforce Planning, and Assistant Secretaries Muiris O'Connor, Louise McGirr and Niall Redmond.

Progress Made to Date

I am pleased to say that we are continuing to make strong progress in implementing reforms designed to achieve the Sláintecare vision.

Significant investment continues to be made by Government in 2023 and this is delivering additional staff numbers and health service capacity. We are also working to improve access to and affordability of our health and social care services. Some highlights worth mentioning include:

- Significant progress continues to be made in establishing the necessary infrastructure to orientate care toward the provision of more services in the community.
- Critical care capacity is now 323 beds. This represents a very significant increase of 65 beds, or 25%, over the 2020 baseline of 258 beds.
- Acute bed capacity has increased by 997 beds since January 2020.

- At the end of April 2023, 140,503 whole time equivalents (WTEs) are employed in the health and social care sector, including an increase of 2,758 WTEs since January 2023.
- The number of GP Training Places will increase from 258, in 2022, to 350 in 2024, which is a 35% increase. By 2026, the total number of GP trainees undertaking the four- year programme will increase from the current 932 to 1,300 in 2026- a 45% increase. Capacity on the Non-EU GP Training Scheme will increase from 50 to 250 by the end of 2024, which is a 400% increase.
- We continue to expand eligibility with the abolition of public inpatient charges, which came into effect on 17th April, which means that people will no longer be charged when accessing public inpatient care in our public hospitals.

Future focused- getting the fundamentals right

While we are focused on building capacity to address the immediate bottlenecks in our health and social care services we are also focused on the longer term reforms:

HSE Health Regions

As we have discussed previously, the HSE Health Regions are a priority Sláintecare reform and essential for improved integration of health services and population-based planning in Ireland. The HSE Health Regions Implementation Plan is expected to be considered by Government next week.

Electives

Elective Hospitals will significantly add to our healthcare infrastructure and have a significant impact on future capacity.

Progress is being made in delivering new elective hospitals in Cork and Galway. The HSE has secured a design team to immediately take forward the design process and site investigations are progressing. A draft Business Case for Dublin is now being reviewed by officials and is expected to be submitted to the External Assurance Process shortly.

When fully operational, the electives will deliver almost one million elective /daycase procedures and consultations per year, significantly adding to our much-needed capacity.

Complementary to their development, the Minister recently announced the locations for 4 of the 6 sites for the new surgical hubs in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. The hubs are modelled on the successful Reeves Centre at Tallaght University Hospital, which over 24 months of operation saw the total number of patients waiting on day case surgery reduced by 58%, and a 91% reduction in patients waiting over 3 months.

The first of the new hubs intended to be operational before the end of this year, and more following in 2024.

Workforce

As outlined already, there has been unprecedented growth in our workforce since the start of 2020, with almost 21,000 additional healthcare workers now

employed within our health system, enabling the delivery of increased capacity across all service areas.

We are seeking to continue to invest in our Health and Social Care workforce and to plan for the future. The Minister has indicated that we need to double the number of training places for Medicine and Nursing and Midwifery to achieve health workforce sustainability for Ireland.

For 2023 he is seeking to significantly expand our undergraduate student supply across all Nursing and Midwifery and other health related disciplines. My department continues to work with the Department of Further and Higher Education and the higher education sector to achieve this goal.

Ireland has an over reliance on international recruitment of doctors, nurse and midwives. This is unsustainable in the longer term. In 2021 approximately (40.45%) of our doctors in Ireland and 46% of Nursing and Midwifery Workforce were educated abroad. This is not a sustainable workforce planning model going forward. We need to address these challenges and significantly increase our domestically educated workforce.

Expanded rostering of services

Sláintecare makes clear that to build the health service we need in the future we need to change the way we do things as well as add capacity,

Government have been very clear in supporting fundamental reform in the delivery of care and with initiatives such as the provision of enhanced care

within the community, improvements in chronic disease management, Digital Health and the implementation of HSE Health Regions.

We have seen the significant impact enhanced weekend working is having.

It is essential that we also look to further support those nurses and doctors already rostered over 7 days by activating the range of healthcare services necessary both in hospitals and in the community to ensure improved patient flow and care while also addressing the capacity issues impacting our hospitals.

A group has been established within the HSE to develop a national framework for extended working hours within the healthcare system, focusing initially on urgent and emergency care (UEC) services, and delivering improvements for winter 2023/2024.

The new Consultant contract is a further development that doubles the hours available for rostering from 40 -80 ensuring senior decision makers are available in our hospitals at evenings and weekends.

Sláintecare ‘Future fit’

As mentioned at the previous meeting the Sláintecare Programme Management Office (SPMO) is currently developing the next Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2024 – 2027. We will be building on the work undertaken to date as well as the ‘refresh’ of the 2018 Health Service Capacity Review underway. This will inform the approach we take to further building capacity, and to ensuring that we are focused on getting fundamentals right for the long-term as well as on delivering in the short-term to meet the growing

health and social care needs of our population. I look forward to engaging with you on the development of this important next phase of our work towards achieving the Sláintecare vision.

ENDS.