

Select Committee on Health

Revised Estimates 2024

31st January 2024

Minister's Opening Statement

Introduction

Good morning, Chair and Members of the Committee. I am delighted to be before the Committee this morning to consider the Revised Estimates for the Department of Health for 2024.

I am joined here by my colleague Minister Hildegard Naughton and officials from my Department Louise McGirr (Assistant Secretary), Kevin Colman (Principal Officer) Patrick McGlynn (Principal Officer) and Aonraid Dunne (Principal Officer) and Trevor Moore (Principal Officer).

Over the past four years, this Government has delivered record levels of investment in the health service.

This has led to a huge increase in recruitment. There are now 26,172 more staff working in our health service than there were at the beginning of 2020. That

represents a 22% increase, meaning that for every 5 people working in the health service in 2020, we now have 6.

The 26,172 increase includes an additional 8,038 nurses and midwives; 4,017 health and social care professionals; and 2,904 doctors and dentists. We have increased our acute hospital bed capacity by 1,126 (net) over the same time period. This level of investment is helping our health service to meet the increasing level of demands we are facing.

In the post emergency pandemic phase, we, like many other countries, have seen extraordinary increases in demand for services against a backdrop of high inflation. Of this year's funding allocation, the majority is focused on absorbing price inflation and meeting growing patient demand.

Focus for 2024

Priorities for 2024 continue to be reduction in waiting lists and delivery of ongoing improvements to urgent and emergency care.

2023 was the second year in a row that national hospital waiting lists fell, with 1.74 million patients treated and removed from waiting lists. Over 177,000

more patients were removed from our acute hospital waiting lists last year compared with 2022. This is an 11% increase year on year.

The figures that matter most are the number of patients waiting longer than the agreed Sláintecare maximum wait time targets, as recommended in the 2017 Sláintecare Report. The core target of achieving a 10% reduction in the number of patients breaching the Sláintecare waiting times was exceeded, with an 11% reduction achieved. This covers inpatients, day case, outpatients and GI scopes. It equates to 57,000 fewer people exceeding the 10/12 week targets than at the end of 2022.

Since the pandemic peaks there has been a 27% reduction in the number of people waiting longer than the Sláintecare targets, which equates to nearly 170,000 people.

Significant funding has been allocated to further reduce waiting lists in 2024. We will also continue to prioritise, and invest in, improving access to urgent and emergency care.

While we face very real challenges in a number of hospitals, it's important to acknowledge that a number of hospitals are performing very well. Nationally, the number of patients on trolleys in the last 6 months of 2023 was down by 20% compared to the same period in 2022.

Funding to support measures to mitigate surge pressures in urgent and emergency care has been provided for 2024.

In 2024 we will continue to invest in our workforce, including:

- the further rollout of Safe Nurse Staffing.
- the expansion of student nurse and medical education places.
- roll out of the public only consultant contract.

We will prioritise an expansion of our health infrastructure and increase capacity. I have committed funding to staff:

- new surgical hubs.
- 162 net additional acute beds
- 22 ICU beds
- 160 community beds

We are increasing our investment in digital health. The new patient app will begin to allow patients to access their own information. We are investing in virtual wards, the use of more tele-health, and progressing eHealth initiatives like the summary care and shared care record. All of these projects will have a real impact on how patients experience and access health services and information.

I am also pleased to announce increased investment in mental health services, with an additional €44 million provided in 2024 for the provision of a range of services. This year's funding is particularly focused on youth mental health with €10 million specifically allocated to underpin service improvements and developments across CAMHS and youth mental health.

I am funding a range of other measures including:

- Free contraception to 31 so women don't age out of the scheme. This brings our very significant investment in free contraception up to approx. €43 million for 2024.
- The availability of PrEP (€0.6 million).
- Progressing a diabetes patient register (€0.5 million)

- Progressing our genetics capacity (€1.9 million) with the continued build out of Genetics and Genomics in healthcare delivery. This investment prioritises the recruitment specialist staff and will increase the accessibility of genetic and genomic medicine service for patients across the country.

To support the incredible levels of activity and some of the financial challenges in 2024 the health service has been allocated additional non-core funding of €1,032 million.

This fund will:

- Increase population protection from COVID through vaccination programmes and ongoing monitoring.
- Reduce our waiting lists through insourcing and the use of additional private capacity.
- Increase our capacity to help us manage our patient flow.
- Support community groups in areas of mental health, older persons, and social inclusion.
- €432 million of this fund will be allocated to our 'Health Resilience Fund' to

- Provide for cost of additional goods and services in acutes.
- Invest in technology and information systems in particular IFMS acceleration.

Despite this provision of non-core funding, it is entirely possible that there will be a substantial supplementary required next year due to inflation and growing patient demand.

Reform and Productivity

I am committed to delivering a significant programme of savings and improved productivity. I recently set up a Productivity and Savings Taskforce to ensure the most efficient use of existing funding and provide as many services as possible to patients, while at the same time meeting the needs of a growing and ageing population.

While we have succeeded in increasing activity in our hospitals, and with better outcomes for our citizens, this has come at an increasingly high cost.

Investment in acute care activity has increased by more than 80 per cent over the last seven years, from €4.4 billion in 2016 to €8.1 billion in 2023. Acute care expenditure now makes up over a third of our overall spending.

The quality of care has undoubtedly improved. We can see this through improved outcomes. And, while activity has increased, the number of patients treated has not kept up with this large increase in resourcing.

Even accepting improvements in outcomes, this presents a substantial divergence between resourcing and activity.

Addressing this productivity puzzle will be a top priority for myself, my Department and HSE management this year.

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