

Opening Statement
Joint Committee on Health
Issues Related to Dental Services in the Healthcare System
Wednesday 14 January, 10.45am

Introduction

- Good morning.
- I am grateful for the opportunity to address you today. I am responsible for primary care oversight and performance in the Department of Health, and I'm joined by Mr. Simon Fahey, Principal Officer for Oral Health Policy, and Dr. Dympna Kavanagh, Chief Dental Officer.
- Oral health is not just about teeth—it is integral to overall health, wellbeing, and quality of life.
- Government policy aims to ensure that every person has the support to enable them to achieve their best oral health.
- Sugar and alcohol taxes, reformulation and labelling of foods, tobacco cessation, HPV vaccination and water fluoridation are core elements through which oral health can be supported at population level.
- However, access to timely, affordable, and quality dental care, with an emphasis on disease prevention, is also necessary.

Investment and Service Provision

- The State invests over €240 million annually in oral healthcare. This supports:
 - The HSE Public Dental Service, which provides care for children and vulnerable adults.
 - HSE Orthodontic Services, addressing complex orthodontic needs.
 - The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) for adult medical card holders.
 - The Dental Treatment Benefit Scheme, supporting insured workers and retirees, overseen by the Department of Social Protection.
- These schemes are essential for maintaining access for those who rely on State assistance, particularly vulnerable groups.

Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS)

- We know that targeted investment and policy reform can deliver measurable improvements in access.
- Following changes introduced in 2022, including a renewed focus on preventive care and fee increases of 40% to 60%, access to care has improved.
- In 2025, over 307,000 patients received over one million episodes of care under the Scheme.
- In the past four years, 50,000 additional patients received care and the number of treatments funded has risen by 240,000.
- However, there is more work to do, we need to build on these reforms with innovative approaches to further improve access.

HSE Public Dental Service

- The HSE Public Dental Service provides care to several patient groups.
- Between January to October last, over 122,000 adults and children accessed the service.
- It is important to reflect that the current service model, including children's care, derives from the 1994 Dental Health Action Plan and the evidence of that time.
- Today, international best practice indicates that the population should be supported much earlier with continued seamless care right across the life course.
- As such, we acknowledge that reform of the public and private dental service is required alongside capacity development.

Policy Reform and Implementation

- The Department is committed to implementing the National Oral Health Policy, which sets out a vision for modern, evidence-based oral healthcare.
- The Policy provides a framework for comprehensive reform, legislative change, strategic workforce planning, and enhanced education and training.
- These reforms prioritise essential oral healthcare, delivered through a reoriented, primary care-focused model to ensure the most vulnerable can access the care they need.
- This aligns with the WHO Global Oral Health Action Plan 2024.
- The trends show that a future challenge will be to maintain oral health into old age supported by regular periodontal or gum care as poor gum

health is not only linked with loss of teeth but also poor cardiac and diabetic outcomes.

- To support this, with the HSE, we are developing a phase one, three-year implementation plan to bring all strands of strategic reform together, supported by governance structures.
- Priorities include reviewing and reforming the adult medical card scheme; developing prevention-focused oral healthcare packages for children; regulatory reforms such as statutory continuing professional development for dentists; and enhanced workforce planning capability.
- In line with best practice, we are designing and delivering services that represent a move from traditional curative care, towards preventative care and health promotion.

Capacity and Workforce Planning

- The workforce figures are trending upwards, there are now 3,945 registered dentists in Ireland, up 167 since January 2025.
- This is an increase of 27% since the Policy was published in 2019.
- Last September, the Minister launched a new undergraduate dental programme at the RCSI, with an initial intake of 20 EU students per year, rising to 35 at full rollout in 2027.
- We also aim to optimise workforce capacity across all dental professions.
- Reform of oral health services requires substantial change in training and education, and an enhanced role for a wider range of the professionals on the dental team including nurses and hygienists in the provision of oral healthcare.

- For example, enabling dental hygienists to work to the top of their scope of practice will expand our capacity and reach.
- This will help address many emerging demographic and epidemiology oral disease trends.
- This year we aim to commence a proof-of-concept mobile dental clinic for children, one of the aims of which will be to thoroughly evaluate direct access to preventive elements of the scope of practice of dental hygienists thus safely expanding access to preventative care.

Conclusion

- So, in conclusion, we remain committed to progressing reforms across oral health services, the regulatory framework, and enhancing patient access.
- A significant body of work is underway, but we are mindful of the need to accelerate reforms and deliver positive impacts for patients.
- Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee on these important matters.
- We look forward to engaging with you and responding to your questions.