

Joint Committee

On

Health

OPENING STATEMENT

By

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Introduction

Good morning Chair and members of the Committee. Thank you for your invitation to meet with the Committee today to discuss matters relating to Dental Services in the HSE.

I am joined today by my colleagues;

- Mr Pat Healy, National Director, National Services & Schemes
- Dr. Anne O' Neill, Assistant National Director Oral Health
- Mr. TJ Dunford, Assistant National Director Primary Care Access & Integration

I am supported by Ms Caroline Crawford from my office.

In recent days the Committee would have received a detailed briefing on progress made and activity delivered over recent years including reforms underway in line with the National Oral Health policy.

Current Service Provision

The HSE delivers oral health services through three main channels:

- The **Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS)**, which enables medical card holders over 16 to access care through contracted dentists.
- The **Community Dental Service**, which provides care for children under 16, patients with additional needs, and emergency treatment.
- **Orthodontic services** for children who meet defined clinical criteria

The National Oral Health Policy, "Smile agus Sláinte", launched in 2019, sets out a transformative vision—moving from a targeted school programme to a life-course approach, embedding prevention and integration within broader health strategies.

Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS, Adult Services):

Following the introduction of a number of changes and fee adjustment in May 2022, there has been a significant increase in activity under the DTSS scheme. In 2025, over **307,000** adults received care under the DTSS—up 20% on 2022. More than **1.05 million** treatments were delivered last year, a 30% increase over the same period. Investment has grown by 43%, with **€69.9** million paid to contractors in 2025.

Community Dental Service (Public Dental Service):

Dental services for children under 16 years are delivered through 17 dental areas nationwide. In the period to November 2025 over **138,000 new patients** were assessed, including 94,800 under targeted programmes in respect of school and special care programmes with over 40,000 others assessed in the non-target groups including emergencies.

Orthodontic Services:

The HSE provides orthodontic treatment, free of charge, to children who meet defined clinical criteria under the HSE Orthodontic Guidelines Waiting list initiatives. These initiatives have delivered a significant impact over recent years. Over €20 million has been invested in contracted orthodontic care, resulting in more than **5,200 removals** from waiting lists. A dedicated orthognathic surgery programme has supported 206 patients to date, addressing complex needs that cannot be met through orthodontics alone.

Access

Access to dental services remains a significant challenge for some groups of patients. In addition, access to services in some parts of the country is particularly challenging. We acknowledge the impact that this has on patients and are committed to making every effort within the resources available to us to improve access to all dental services.

Resources

The HSE budget for Oral Health was €182.1m at the end of 2025. It has increased steadily over recent year, reflecting growing demand and strategic investment in dental and orthodontic care. There are currently 373 WTEs working across the HSE services including consultant orthodontists, dental surgeons, dental nurses and hygienists.

While progress is evident, challenges remain:

- Recruitment and retention of dental professionals continue to impact service delivery, particularly in the public dental service.
- Persistent waiting times for orthodontic and complex care require sustained investment and innovative solutions.

- Access to sedation and general anaesthetic facilities for patients with additional needs remains a critical issue, given the demand for hospital-based resources.

In this context the HSE is committed to the implementation of the National Oral Health Policy including continued investment over the coming years. 15 additional posts were approved in 2025 and in line with the new policy a review of staffing levels and skill mix will be undertaken as part of the implementation process.

Future Direction

The HSE through the National Oral Health office is working with the Department of Health and wider stakeholders including the Irish Dental Association to implement the National Oral Health Policy *Smile agus Sláinte*, aligned with Sláintecare and the WHO Global Oral Health Action Plan. Phase One of a three-year implementation plan is under development with the DOH and will prioritise:

- Prevention-focused oral healthcare packages for children.
- Reform of the adult medical card scheme.
- Enhanced workforce planning and education, including expanded roles for dental hygienists and nurses.
- Investment in sedation facilities and specialist training to support patients with additional needs.

These reforms represent a significant shift from traditional curative care towards prevention and health promotion.

This policy aligns with Sláintecare, Healthy Ireland, and First 5, ensuring oral health is integrated within wider health and social strategies. It represents a significant reform programme that will require continued collaboration, resources, and commitment.

Closing

Chair and members, oral health is integral to overall health, and the HSE remains committed to delivering equitable, high-quality services for all. We look forward to working with the Committee and the Department of Health to advance this important agenda.

This concludes my opening statement.

Thank you.