

**Minister Simon Harris, TD, Minister for Health**

**Opening Remarks at Nursing Home Ireland's Annual Conference**

**Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> November 2019**

Thank you very much Maurice. Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much for inviting me to be here with you today to address Nursing Homes Ireland's annual conference.

As Maurice said, it's not my first opportunity to be with you and I'm very pleased to be back with you to have, what I hope, to exchange with you my views in relation to some progress we've made and some very significant areas where we need to make progress.

But the first thing I want to do today is express my gratitude to you, to your organisations, to your nursing homes, for all that you do right across the country. I often think we shouldn't forget the level of employment that you actually provide across this country.

Indeed, if a foreign company was to invest in a village or a town in Ireland it's not lost on me that you'd often see many a government minister going down to welcome and say isn't this great, we're seeing employment in this part of the country. You are providing so much employment in rural Ireland, in urban Ireland, in large towns, in our cities, and in our smallest villages.

I want today to acknowledge beyond just the health service impact that you're having, which I'll get onto in a moment, I want to acknowledge the very important role you play in our local economies in rural and urban Ireland, and to thank you for the work that you do. To thank you for all that you do to meet the needs particularly of older people, and not just the health needs as I think we saw very clearly in that video, but to meet the needs of older citizens, including their social needs and well-being as well.

Everyone in this room wants to work hard to support older people and to support older people to remain in their homes for as long as possible. That's what we all want to do. As citizens we all want to grow old, at home, in our community. While there are a number of things we can do to make that dream a reality for more people the truth of the matter is that there will always be people who will need long-term residential nursing home care. That's a fact and we need to recognise that.

Your members of Nursing Homes Ireland play an essential and indeed a critical role in meeting these needs. So you are key health service partners and you do also play a role in ensuring that people can get out of our hospitals. We talk every day about the level of busyness in our acute hospitals. The ability that you have to assist people in being discharged from our hospitals to go to a nursing home, to go to a transitional care bed, is an extremely important role, particularly at this time of the year in the winter cycle and all the pressures that that brings.

Some good news. We're living an awful lot longer in this country than we used. Everyone in this room – man or woman – has a greater chance of living longer than a man or woman in another EU country. We are now above the EU average when it comes to life expectancy. I often joke, and it's only a joke, that that's good news for everyone other than the Health Minister because, with that, come real challenges, because we've got to actually make sure we can meet the care needs. A baby girl born in any one of our maternity hospitals today in Ireland has a 50% chance of living to be at least a hundred. I mean, these are incredible statistics. This is really, really, good news, and we need to be careful, all of us, when we talk about people living older, that we don't talk about it as a burden. It's a good thing. It's a thing that should be celebrated that people are not only living longer in our country but thankfully people are also staying healthier in our country. They're living longer, healthier lives.

This is a success story that should be acknowledged, it should be celebrated, we talk enough, and we should talk enough about the challenges in our health service, but this is as a result of your care and dedication, as a result of the care and dedication of people working across our health service and as a result of a very significant amount of investment in trying to improve outcomes in conditions like cancer, stroke, heart attacks, all of which have seen a very significant increase in our survival rates.

We know that in this country there will 1.4 million people aged over 65 by 2041 and we know that by 2041 people over 65 in Ireland will make up about 22% of our total population. So, currently we have the youngest population in the European Union, we are still a very young country, but that demographic is about to change, and in many ways it's changing at a pace that's behind many other European countries. Lots of countries across the EU have gone through this challenge already. We need to learn from their experiences because our birth rate will slow down and the rate of older people in our country will increase. And that does bring challenges but it also brings opportunities - opportunities for us to do things in new and different ways and we do owe a great debt of gratitude

to previous generations and one of the best ways we can repay or acknowledge that debt is to try and ensure that they can age with dignity and respect and in a positive manner in our country.

So given the projected demographic trends, there's absolutely no doubt that Ensuring Homes Ireland, and all of your member organisations, are going to continue to be a significant provider of care and are also respectfully with significant support required from us going to need to change how we do things as well if we are to meet those challenges.

So our firm policy commitment, and Maurice referenced Slaintecare, is to try and provide as many health services as is appropriate to do so in the community, keeping care close to home and having a greater range of health and social care services. That's what people want. People will always need to travel for certain specialities, for certain levels of excellence in terms of some conditions, but we need to try and do much more in our community and you will see right across the country we've now built these lovely shiny primary care centres. There's 127 of them now open now; there's 80 more on the way. But we need them to be a lot more than nice, shiny buildings that host the local GP and the local pharmacy. We need to make them really busy and I'm pleased to say that in the budget we had only a few weeks ago one of the big wins, if you like, for the health service, was that we received the go ahead to recruit a thousand additional community staff. I call them the Slaintecare Workforce to work in our primary care services. This will include more therapists in the community, more nurses in the community, more dementia advisers, more public health nurses, more people to support your residents and your future residents. Alongside this investment, we're continuing develop new ways of working, including the development of community health networks. We can't have a healthcare professional in the community working on their own. They now need to work as part of a team in a networked way. This is a key part of this Slaintecare vision. But in any sort of well-functioning, better integrated health service, the part played by your sector will continue to be critical, and the Fair Deal will continue to be a key support for older people into the future.

I think, in fairness to my predecessors, when they introduced the Fair Deal scheme, it was seen as a little controversial at the time. It took many a year to introduce. I think it took seven years actually to introduce the Fair Deal Scheme and, you know, I think it was the right thing to do. There was a lot of opposition at the time, there was a lot of political opposition at the time, we were in opposition at the time – perhaps we were critical at the time, I'm not sure, I wasn't around – but there was the normal politics around trying to bring about change. And it has worked. But you can't stand still. The Fair Deal has to be fair for everyone and I need to acknowledge that it's not always fair for the

providers of nursing home care. So we need to look now to how we can improve and reform the Fair Deal scheme because fair has to be fair for everyone.

So we are providing more funding. We've put in an additional €45m into the Fair Deal budget over the last two years to continue to meet that demand of more and more people requiring a Fair Deal place each and every year. As you know, we did have the built-in review in relation to Fair Deal which made its recommendations in 2015. We've made progress on some of those recommendations, it's important to say that. Most recently how we treat farmers and small business owners in relation to their assets. It's not right that if you own a bit of land that that the whole value of that land is now being accounted as if it's your income. That's not the way the world works in relation to farmers or indeed in relation to business assets. As recently as yesterday our Bill to amend the Fair Deal to treat farmers and small business owners more fairly was scrutinised by the Oireachtas Health Committee and I expect will pass into law in early 2020.

But we also need to move forward on the Pricing Review. I want to confirm to you today is that I've now received the Pricing Review. It is finally completed, you'll be glad to know. The NTPF has submitted it to my Department in recent days and my commitment to you now is to invite Nursing Homes Ireland into my Department in the next few weeks prior to its publication. I think that's a courtesy you should be afforded. You shouldn't be reading about this in a newspaper or it shouldn't just be tossed out. You need to be invited in to be briefed on it. We need to argue the toss, I'm sure, on certain elements of it. But in response to your Chairman's call, let's be transparent, let's engage, let's publish it in the next few weeks, and then let's get on with trying to implement some of the recommendations that I believe will support and help the nursing home sector.

But we need to do more than that. I think if we're being honest with each other, we need to try and re-build our relationship. The relationship between the nursing home sector and the State because it's fractured. I know it's fractured. I'm looking at familiar faces here who come and tell me it's fractured. People I meet in nursing homes as I travel across the country. It's been a tough number of years to be a nursing home owner. You've been asked to make big changes. Changes that I'll absolutely stand over. Changes in relation to HIQA guidelines and regulations. But changes that have been stressful and changes that have come at a cost and you haven't be remunerated for that cost. So we need to look at how we can re-build our relationship based on mutual respect because we're all in this together. We're inter-dependent in terms of how we succeed, or indeed in terms of how we fail, and failure is not an option.

So I would put it up to Nursing Homes Ireland, as you've put it up to me, that as we publish the Pricing Review, let's look at how we can have a much more regular forum for engagement. Let's look at a way we can establish that we don't just talk when there's a crisis. We don't just talk when there's a row. But that we actually have an ongoing dialogue in relation to the nursing home sector.

There's some other areas we need to help you with as well. The whole issue of work permits needs to be addressed. Thank God this economy is now back at effectively full employment. But we know we've services that can't be provided because you can't find staff and sometimes I can't find them in the public health service either. We need to fill those vacancies and that means in a modern, inclusive, tolerant, and compassionate Republic, unlike some of the nonsense we heard this week. We need to bring in professionals from abroad who can help provide health services in Ireland. I'm working with my colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise, and Innovation, to look at how we can have a better work permit system for people to work in the nursing home sector. I would be very eager to engage with Tadhg and Maurice and your members in relation to that.

We also need to look at how we can encourage people who might be at home – and not wishing to return to full-time work for a whole variety of reasons – how we can encourage and incentivise them to perhaps come back and work be it be part-time, short works, flexi-weeks. I think one of the most exciting things I've seen this year, and I see my friend Dermot McDermott who has led on this and advocated on this, is the idea of an apprenticeship scheme in terms of our healthcare assistants. I know the work being done by Griffith College in relation to this is very, very encouraging, and I hope it will create a pathway for more and more people to say I want to be a healthcare assistant, I'd like to go back and do some training, and I'd like to go into my local community nursing home to do a few hours a week. I think that can help as well.

The other area we need to have a very serious conversation about – and I would put it up to you that there are huge opportunities on this for the nursing home sector – is the whole area of a statutory homecare scheme. At the moment every politician since God was a boy has said, as I said at the start of this speech, we want people to be able to grow old in their own home with dignity. But the only actual statutory scheme, the only legal scheme we have to support people aging, is to go to a nursing home scheme. That has to change. We have to put the homecare scheme – maybe a Fair Deal Scheme 2.0 – we have to put it on a statutory footing. We have to. You can't have a situation that whether you live in Greystones, where I'm from, or Letterkenny or somewhere in Donegal, you

get treated entirely different relation to homecare. There has to be a standardised fair approach in relation to this. But I'd argue this is a massive opportunity for the nursing home sector as well because you're providing day-care services already where perhaps I want to stay at home and I want to live in my community but I'd like to come into the day-care centre for a couple of hours a week. I'd like to come in and maybe get my dinner or my lunch and meet my friends and play Bridge or whatever. There's an opportunity for you there in terms of a potential revenue stream. So I would ask – in fairness I don't think it's seen as this – but I'd ask that we don't see the statutory homecare scheme as a threat to the nursing home sector but rather as an opportunity to look at the services you provide and how you reach out to the community as well. Because we're going to move ahead with this. We have funding for next year to begin to test and begin to design the new statutory homecare scheme. Fair Deal, as I said, took about seven years, I think we can do this in about two. We're currently exploring options in terms of regulation of home support providers too. We don't wish to bring HIQA into everybody's sitting room but we do need to find a way of regulating how we see what goes on once the State is funding a statutory homecare scheme. So, I'd really ask nursing homes Ireland, and I know you're up for this, I'd really ask you to work with me in terms of seeing the opportunities that there could be for your stakeholders, for your members, in terms of being part of a statutory homecare scheme because perhaps the nursing homes of the future will be the nursing home with walls, but also there will be a nursing home element without walls where you're actually engaging with people and providing some of the services perhaps in their community and perhaps in their home as well.

The final thought I want to leave you with today, and I know we've had some engagement on this, is how we look at providing more housing options for older people in our country as well. My own Department and the Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government have been working together on developing a policy framework which we can try and promote a variety of housing options, including housing with care of older people. So, again, if I'm in my sixties or my seventies, and do need nursing care, I may not wish to go into the big traditional nursing home, I may wish to have an option of living in a house nearby, or perhaps even on the same campus, with nursing care. Indeed there are some of these – I visited some already – where people can live in a house, if you like, on the campus and the continuum of care is there and perhaps later in life you need to move into the traditional nursing home.

So, again, challenges for us here, absolutely, but certainly opportunities, I think, when we look at how we can provide a variety of home models for older people. There's definitely a demand for this

at a local level. There's a demand for this from older citizens. They're asking government to do more and to do better in this regard as well. So, we've now set up an implementation group with an independent Chairman to begin to explore these ideas. Again, I think this is an area that we should be engaged on.

So my message today is one of thanks and gratitude. One of acknowledging that we've made progress, that we are co-dependent and inter-dependent, but we're also honestly saying to you we need to move ahead on the publication of the Pricing Review. We need to look at how we can rebuild a relationship based on mutual respect and we need to somewhat hold hands and take a leap into the new, transformative way of providing care, be that in terms of statutory home care, housing options, and the like, because the world is going to have to change in terms of dealing with demographic pressures. But we shouldn't be frightened by that. In fact, we should be enthused by it and we'll certainly work with you in that regard. So it's so clear that continuing investments in services for older people is vital, it's a good thing that we're living longer than ever before, but living longer is not enough. We need people to live longer and live better, healthier lives, and I know that's a view shared by all of us here. So, I do want to take a moment to thank you for the exceptional work you do, to acknowledge the extremely important role of private and voluntary nursing homes across our country and to commit to you to do better and to do more in terms of my engagement with Nursing Homes Ireland.

Go raibh míle maith agat.