

Client: Nursing Homes Ireland
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CARE CRISIS AMID WAVE OF NURSING HOME CLOSURES

Campaigners fear elderly patients will have nowhere to turn and will place increasing pressure on overcrowded hospitals

By **Helen Bruce**
and **Craig Hughes**

OLDER people in need of care face an 'uncertain future' with more nursing homes closing down and overcrowded hospitals already at capacity.

New analysis shows that, with Ireland's ageing population rising rapidly, 31 nursing homes have closed in the past three years, with the loss of 915 beds.

Nursing Homes Ireland (NHI) said that further closures are inevitable without substantial reforms to the pricing model being introduced, together with an increased Fair Deal budget.

This comes at a time when hospital waiting lists are growing, and nurses and doctors are crying out for increased step-down facilities to allow 'bed-blocker' patients to be transferred out.

Tadhg Daly, NHI chief executive, said the closures 'present an uncertain future for the care of our ageing population and our sector'. He added: 'It must serve

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Fewer care beds 'will cause more backups in hospitals'

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as a further wake-up call for Government.' Mr Daly said it was becoming 'increasingly unfeasible to operate a nursing home in Ireland', stating that over 20 have closed their doors since the beginning of last year.

'The sector is in a state of crisis and contraction, with more and more homes and beds closing and not being replaced,' he said. 'This has been particularly prevalent among smaller operators in rural areas to date, but will encapsulate medium-sized and larger operators if the status quo prevails. Urgent intervention is required.'

Hospital overcrowding remains a constant concern, with 11,856 people, including 300 children, on trolleys in May, according to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation. It is the worst level of overcrowding reported for May

since records began.

Stephen McMahon, director of the Irish Patients' Association, said it was in everyone's interests to find a patient and resident-centred solution to the challenges. 'If there are less nursing home beds it will cause further backups within hospitals and EDs,' he said.

He added that the falling number of nursing homes would also 'make it a cumbersome process for families to find residential care for their loved ones'.

A report by PwC published yesterday revealed that the cost of caring for each resident has risen by 36% in six years, and that 33% of nursing homes reported an operating loss in 2022, up from 19% in 2021.

The independent analysis was commissioned by the NHI against the backdrop of 31 private and voluntary nursing home closures over the last three

years. The NHI said that declining profitability coupled with rising interest rates, construction costs and land prices has meant that the business case for additional nursing homes to be built is no longer commercially viable. In addition, they are dealing with increasingly complex resident profiles.

Ageing demographics and increased use of home support services mean that nursing home staff are now caring for a resident that is older, of higher dependency, and requiring a greater number of care hours.

Nursing home managers said operating costs have been driven upwards by the impact of infection prevention control requirements, recent inflationary pressures, and health sector-wide staffing shortages.

The Census 2022 figures, released this week, showed that Ireland has the fastest-growing

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older population in Europe, with the highest increase in the population in the over-70s, rising from 426,331 to 538,171 – an increase of 26% between 2016 and 2022.

Mr Daly said there was a need for immediate action on Fair Deal rates to address the crisis. He said the rates should be based on a resident's individual care needs, and that there should also be better planning for future bed capacity requirements.

Sinn Féin health spokesman David Cullinane said he has proposed a solution that would see more funding provided to the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) and the introduction of a collective pay agreement for healthcare assistants and nurses. 'For me the big challenge is attracting staff. The rates of pay are less than what the HSE pays. What we need is a collective pay agreement for healthcare assistants and nurses, and any additional funding that is provided into nursing homes and NTPF to pay for that,' he said.

The Department of Health said in a statement: 'The Government is conscious of the financial challenges faced by the nursing home sector... €1.4billion of the health budget was allocated last year to support over 22,700 people under Fair Deal. This will increase to nearly €1.5billion for 2023.'

The statement continued: 'Maximum prices for individual nursing homes are agreed with the NTPF following negotiations and based on the NTPF's cost criteria such as costs reasonably incurred by the nursing home, local market prices, historic prices and overall budgetary capacity... Anyone who has had a scheduled renegotiation of their deed of agreement this year with the NTPF has seen a significant uplift in funding provided. The NTPF has statutory independence, and there is no role for ministers or the Department of Health in negotiations with individual nursing homes.'

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'Big challenge is attracting staff'



Fears: Tadhg
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