Opening Statement to Special Committee on Covid-19 Response  
- Jim Breslin, Secretary General, Department of Health

Thank you, Chairman and Committee Members.

Since its emergence COVID-19 has spread rapidly presenting an unprecedented global challenge. Of the over 8 million cases worldwide, some 25,000 of these have been in Ireland where, very sadly, 1,709 people have lost their lives. The deaths in our nursing homes are the most difficult aspect of our national experience and each person who has died is deeply mourned by their families and all of us collectively.

Nursing homes are where over 30,000 of our citizens call home. Residents of nursing homes are vulnerable because of their age, underlying medical conditions and the extent of their requirement for care involving close physical contact. NPHET, the Department of Health, the HSE and HIQA placed a focus on supporting older people from the outset of the pandemic. A specific NPHET subgroup was established on vulnerable people on 3rd March.

Responding to COVID-19 involves an all of society, public health led approach with interruption of virus transmission the main goal. An important means of protecting nursing homes has been to reduce the
amount of disease in the community. Suppressing the virus in the general population is a key action to limit spread to nursing homes and other settings. In addition, specific protective measures for nursing homes were introduced including general infection prevention, social distancing, visitor restrictions, cocooning, guidance, training, testing and enhanced HSE supports for providers.

The public health advice and range of support to nursing homes has been continually reviewed in the light of experience here and that of other countries.

Public health advice is that key to protecting patients and staff in nursing home settings is to follow the whole package of infection control guidance. Compliance with infection control standards forms part of the legal responsibilities of persons in charge of nursing homes. Specific COVID19 infection control guidance for nursing homes was published and circulated on 10 March.

Whereas Ireland recorded its first case of COVID-19 on 29th February, it was not until 16th March that the first case in a nursing home was notified by the HPSC. Cases peaked in the general population on 28th March but, around this time, cases in nursing homes commenced their increase. The peak in nursing homes occurred almost four weeks later, on 22nd April.
Since then new cases have steadily declined and, today, 50% of all nursing home clusters are closed, meaning they have been COVID free for 28 days or longer. This has been an extremely challenging time for the residents, staff and families. Some 18 percent of the 30,000 residents of nursing homes have had a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19.

I want to recognise the enormous efforts of staff in nursing homes throughout the period and others who have supported them. Because of their efforts 56% of all nursing homes have remained virus free and the great majority of residents never contracted the virus. This is in the context of a highly infectious virus; much more infectious than influenza, smallpox or measles.

On 29th and 30th March the Department convened a series of meetings to examine the disease trends in nursing homes, strategies adopted to date and further measures available. The Department, HIQA, HPSC and HSE participated. HIQA’s regulatory programmes provide it with a unique knowledge of the nursing home sector. In response to a specific request from the Department, on 30th March HIQA provided details of nursing homes which were considered potentially at risk having been found in previous inspections not to have fully met regulations in areas such as infection control and risk management.
The next day NPHET requested HIQA to risk assess all nursing homes and liaise with nursing homes and the HSE nationally and regionally as necessary. On 3rd April HIQA established an Infection Prevention and Control Hub and commenced a COVID-19 daily escalation pathway to the HSE which has informed the HSE’s targeting of supports to private nursing homes.

Ireland is one of the few countries that has undertaken mass testing in nursing homes. Over 95,900 tests were completed in long term care settings following a NPHET recommendation on 17th April. Our commitment to recording all deaths associated with COVID-19, whether laboratory confirmed or probable, wherever they occur, means our figures are more accurate than in many countries. We have also undertaken a comprehensive survey of deaths in long term residential care to ensure we are fully and transparently capturing the position. This was highlighted by Dr David Nabarro, the WHO’s Special Envoy on COVID-19 at this Committee last week, saying Ireland’s data was more “honest” than many other countries.

Sustained communication has been central to the response to COVID-19. Extensive ongoing, problem-solving between Nursing Homes Ireland (NHI), the HSE, the NTPF and the Department continues. NHI provided early assurance in February to the Department that it was
supporting providers to develop their own COVID-19 operational resilience and was working with the HSE and HPSC.

Guidance, PPE, staffing, accommodation and financial support issues were addressed as they arose. On 9th March availability of PPE was provided by the HSE through local teams to private nursing homes. Up to date figures show that over the course of the pandemic PPE to a value of €27 million has been provided. Furthermore, a €72 million temporary support package is in place. In the earliest period the HSE experienced difficulties in securing supplies and scaling up testing and PPE operations. Such difficulties were experienced in many other health systems, sometimes with less success in overcoming them than the HSE achieved.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Ireland will continue to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have witnessed over the past number of months extreme and rapid action to safeguard our communities and our vulnerable people within them. COVID-19 is currently suppressed in the community and in our nursing homes. It has taken the efforts of the entire country to supress this virus over the last number of months and it will take great vigilance on all our parts to prevent any surges of infection in the future. The priority now is to maintain high quality infection prevention measures across all health care settings.
The recommendations of the COVID-19 Nursing Home Expert Panel established by the Minister will be available in the coming weeks to provide further guidance in respect of nursing homes.

The social care sector in many jurisdictions has been hit very hard by COVID-19. While we have an important strength compared to some others in that our social care services form part of the responsibilities of the health service, there is a need for greater integration between health and social care. Hospitals tend to be better endowed with expertise and resources and the continuum of care for older people is not sufficiently integrated. The HSE’s mobilisation of 23 COVID-19 multidisciplinary response teams demonstrates the type of integrated approach that is needed. Integration of services and structures at the population level is key to the Sláintecare reform programme and will be extremely beneficial in addressing the growing needs of our ageing population into the future.