



Opening Statement Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health 15th May 2024

On behalf of the Neurological Alliance of Ireland (NAI), the national umbrella for over 30 neurological charities I would like to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for their invitation today to consider the implementation of healthcare strategies for neurology and neurorehabilitation services.

Members of the Committee attended our briefing in the AV room on 24th April when we outlined the challenge for our health system in responding to the needs of the 50,000 people diagnosed with a neurological condition each year.

Over 860,000 people throughout Ireland are currently living with a neurological condition and that number is set to increase significantly with our growing and ageing population.

Following on from the NAI presentation in May last year, we welcome this further opportunity to outline to the members of this Committee the progress that has been made and the challenges that remain.

Unfortunately, while we have seen significant investment over the past three years to implement national strategies for neurology and neurorehabilitation, this legacy of progress is at serious risk of being undermined by the ongoing recruitment moratorium and delays in delivering on commitments that have been made to people with neurological conditions, their families and communities throughout this country.

On neurology services, we thank the Committee for their support in response to our 2022 call for action to tackle the shortage of one hundred specialist neurology nurses. Thanks to your support and representation, and the interest and commitment of Minister for Disabilities, Anne Rabbitte, funding for 21 specialist nursing posts was announced in October 2022. Unfortunately the benefits of this significant investment have yet to be fully realised in hospitals throughout the country, in Cork, Waterford, Sligo, Limerick, Galway and Dublin because 13 of these vital nursing posts are held up within the current recruitment moratorium. We are joined today by the National Clinical Lead for Neurology, Professor Sinead Murphy, who will speak to the importance of enabling recruitment to these posts, and also to the urgent need to tackle the regional inequities that exist in relation to access to outpatient neurology services. The NAI is calling for funding in this year's Budget to begin to tackle this inequity, by investing in 5 Consultant Neurology posts to support hospitals in Portlaoise, Bantry, Wexford, Letterkenny and Mayo.

On neurorehabilitation services, we have engaged regularly with this Committee over the past two years in relation to the delays in implementing the 2019-2021 implementation framework for the National Neurorehabilitation Strategy. Again we recognise some positive Government progress towards its commitments in the Slaintecare Action Plan and the current Programme for Government on the Neurorehabilitation Strategy. Our call to expedite the rollout of nine community neurorehabilitation teams across the country saw funding allocated by Minister for Disability Anne Rabbitte for four teams across two successive Budgets in 2022 and 2023. Unfortunately as we will highlight today, the delivery of this important commitment to communities across Ireland is also

being impacted by delays: the promise to this Committee last May to see teams “in CHO areas 2,4,6 and 7 fully functional by early 2024” has not been realised. A full year on, we still have the same situation we outlined to the Committee this time last year where only two of nine teams are up and running nationwide.

Community neurorehabilitation teams represent one of three key deliverables from the National Neurorehabilitation Strategy. The other two key commitments from the Strategy are the delivery of long term community neurorehabilitation services and inpatient neurorehabilitation beds.

We need to see further investment to support the delivery of longer term community neurorehabilitation services beyond the maximum twelve weeks of intensive rehabilitation provided by the community neurorehabilitation teams. It makes little sense to invest in intensive short term rehabilitation if we cannot support individuals in the longer term to return to or retain their employment, to maintain their independence and to live well with their neurological condition. The majority of these services are delivered by the voluntary sector, research published in 2023 by the Neurological Alliance of Ireland, the Disability Federation of Ireland and the HSE showed that nearly one hundred unique supports being delivered on the ground in communities by voluntary providers to people with neurological conditions and their families.

Again this Government has made some important investments in long term community neurorehabilitation services in the 2024 HSE Service Plan, but this is May 2024 and funds still have not been released to enable these vital services to be delivered on the ground by voluntary providers.

The third deliverable from the National Neurorehabilitation Strategy is a commitment to tackle the shortage of specialist inpatient neurorehabilitation beds throughout the country, especially outside Dublin.

We know that we need 300 beds for the Irish population and we know that we fall far short of this. The most recent Major Trauma audit report in 2021 highlighted that the proportion of major trauma patients who received rehabilitation in an inpatient setting actually declined from 10% in 2020 to 7% in 2021.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to highlight these issues and ask you for your support for our key asks today as follows:

- enable the funds that have already been committed to specialist neurology nurses and community neurorehabilitation services to be actively translated into actual services on the ground
- request the HSE to deliver an immediate action plan to tackle the shortage of inpatient specialist rehabilitation beds
- begin to tackle the regional inequity in access to Consultant Neurology services by providing funding in this year’s Budget to support the development of dedicated outpatient neurology services for Portlaoise, Bantry, Mayo, Letterkenny and Wexford hospitals.

Magdalen Rogers

Executive Director

Neurological Alliance of Ireland