



IASW

Irish Association of Social Workers
Cumann na hÉireann um Oibríthe Sóisialta

Minister Stephen Donnelly
Department of Health,
Block 1 Miesian Plaza,
50 – 58 Lower Baggot Street ,
D02 XW14,
Dublin

23rd July 2020

Dear Minister Donnelly,

I write in response to the email received from your office on 17th July 2020. I confirm that the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) has made a submission to the Expert Nursing Panel and enclose a copy of the submission and accompanying documentation for your attention. I also write to seek a meeting to discuss concerns in relation to the complete lack of engagement with the social work profession around any aspect of adult social care delivery within the Department of Health over the course of the pandemic.

Our submission details the concerns and expertise of the social work profession in relation to the devastating impact of Covid_19 both on residents in nursing homes in terms of their safeguarding and psychosocial needs and their families, whose communication and connection needs were overlooked in the national response. The 'Prime Time' documentary aired on 16th July 2020 clearly demonstrated that the concerns the IASW has repeatedly raised are valid and continue at the time of writing, to be unmet.

Prior to your appointment as Minister, the Irish Association of Social Workers wrote to Minister Simon Harris, to the Secretary General in the Department of Health, to Ms Anne O Connor in the HSE, to Dr Kathleen MacLellan, Chair of the NPHET Vulnerable Adult Subgroup Committee and to Dr Tony Holohan, then Chief Medical Officer, offering the expertise of social work in the development of a national response to the nursing home crisis. With the exception of Ms Anne O Connor, no response was received. Deputy Roisin Shortall kindly intervened on our behalf with Minister Harris to query if he intended to respond to any of our correspondence. Minister Harris subsequently clarified to Deputy Shortall that he had submitted IASW correspondence to the Expert Panel.

The social work profession has not been consulted by the Department of Health in any aspect of the national response to adult social care during the pandemic. It is deeply concerning that the profession responsible for the supporting the most marginalised and vulnerable in Irish society across the lifespan, across multiple public/voluntary health and social care services in Ireland has itself been effectively unheard throughout the process to date and our efforts to engage have been met with silence.

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This is in stark contrast to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs which benefits from the expertise of a Chief Social Worker and from the Department of Health in Northern Ireland which benefits from a Chief Social Worker office and team, for a population of 1.8 million people. In Northern Ireland, the Chief Social Worker accounts directly to the Minister for Health and has played a leading role in the response to adult social care, particularly in the nursing home sector, ensuring that the broader psychosocial needs of residents were considered in the government response. Yet in the Republic, the expertise of social work is not valued and has been entirely excluded from the Department of Health, to the point where communication expressing valid concerns have been ignored, resulting in our inability to share expertise.

We wish to meet with you to review current communication and governance structures, with a view to establishing meaningful dialogue focusing on means of inclusion of social work expertise within the Department of Health. The absence of this expertise has resulted in the dominance of a biomedical model of healthcare delivery during the pandemic and does not reflect the expertise or mixed skillset of a modern health service or deliver the broader communication and psychosocial care expected by the population.

On behalf of the IASW, I would like to congratulate you on your recent appointment and look forward to developing a positive and constructive working relationship with you and your team.

Your Sincerely,

Aine McGuirk,
Chair
IASW

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