Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development

National Meals on Wheels Network

Chair and Committee Members.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf of the National Meals on Wheels Network.

Every month, Meals on Wheels services deliver meals to more than **18,000 people** across Ireland.

Most are older people. Many live alone. For some, the person delivering the meal may be the only person they will see that day. The meal matters, but the knock on the door matters just as much. It provides social contact, reassurance and an informal welfare check that can identify problems before they become crises.

The National Meals on Wheels Network represents over **300 providers**. This year those services will aim to deliver more than **3.3 million meals**.

Meals on Wheels is not simply a food service. It is a preventative health service that supports nutrition, combats loneliness, promotes independence and helps people remain living safely in their own homes.

Ahead of today's meeting, we surveyed HSE-funded providers. Thirty-six services responded, collectively delivering almost **9,000 meals every week** to more than **2,500 people**.

Their responses paint a clear picture of a service that is highly valued, but increasingly under pressure.

The first challenge is sustainability.

Across those 36 services, **813 volunteers**, **169 paid staff** and **109 CE and Tús participants** support delivery. In other words, approximately **three out of every four meal deliveries are carried out by volunteers**.

Nationally, that equates to an estimated **4,500 to 6,000 volunteers** giving their time every week to support their communities. Providers repeatedly tell us that recruiting and retaining new volunteers is becoming more difficult, particularly in rural areas.

The second challenge is funding.

Providers reported that the average cost of preparing and delivering a meal is **€8.57**.

Average HSE support amounts to **€2.73 per meal**, falling to approximately **€2.17** when weighted across service size.

One in five providers receives **no per-meal funding whatsoever**, and **two-thirds receive no contribution towards staffing costs**. Overall, HSE funding covers only around a quarter of the reported cost of delivery.

The remainder is funded through fundraising, client contributions, grant applications and volunteer effort. Across the country, providers estimate this funding gap at between **€19 million and €21 million annually**.

There is also significant inconsistency in how services are funded.

HSE contributions range from as little as **44 cent per meal** to **€8.29 per meal**. Some providers are funded per meal, others receive block grants, while others receive support only for specific costs. The result is a postcode lottery where funding levels often depend more on historic arrangements and geography than on need.

Recent emergencies have also highlighted the essential role Meals on Wheels plays in community resilience. During severe weather events and fuel supply disruptions, providers continued to support vulnerable people despite significant operational challenges.

Yet Meals on Wheels is not formally integrated into national emergency planning structures, despite the fact that local services already know where many of the most vulnerable people in their communities live.

We have shared a national standards document with the committee today which has been proposed to the HSE, we are urging all stakeholders to adopt the proposed national standards as a priority action to enable service enhancement and rapid provision of new services in areas of the country that are not currently being supported.

Demand is also growing. Across our membership, **35% of providers are operating waiting lists**, while other communities have no service at all. Expanding provision requires seed funding, practical support and a clear pathway to recognition and funding.

We welcome the Government's increased investment in Meals on Wheels. Dedicated funding has risen from just over **€3 million in 2022** to **€8.25 million this year**, with a further **€2 million announced in Budget 2027**, bringing the total allocation to **€10.25 million**. This is an important and welcome recognition of the value of the service.

Today, we ask the Committee to support six key recommendations:

First, introduce a nationally consistent Meals on Wheels funding framework that is supported via a standardised service agreement.

Second, ensure funding reflects the true cost of delivering the service, including staffing, transport, energy, insurance and administration

Third, invest in workforce development, volunteer recruitment and retention and succession planning for services

Fourth, provide capital funding to improve resilience and formally integrate Meals on Wheels into emergency planning.

Fifth, provide seed funding and streamlined recognition processes for new services in underserved areas.

And sixth, provide sustainable core funding for the National Meals on Wheels Network, which currently supports more than 300 providers with just **€100,000 annually**.

Chair, investment in Meals on Wheels is investment in prevention. Every meal supports health and wellbeing. Every knock on a door provides reassurance and early intervention.

Every person supported to remain safely at home reduces pressure elsewhere in the health and social care system.

We are asking for a fair and sustainable funding model for a service that communities, families and the State increasingly rely upon.

Thank you, and I welcome your questions.