

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD WITH MINISTER MARY BUTLER T.D. AND THE MEMBERS OF CARRICK ON SUIR MUNICIPAL DISTRICT HELD VIA ZOOM ON THE 4TH JUNE 2021 AT 12:00 HOURS.

In the Chair: Ms. Mary Butler T.D.,
Minister for Mental Health and Older People

Members Present: Cllr. Kevin O'Meara; Cllr. Kieran Bourke; Cllr. David Dunne; Cllr. Imelda Goldsboro; Cllr. Mark Fitzgerald.

In Attendance: Carrick on Suir Municipal District:
Mr. Brian Beck, A/Director of Services;
Ms. Marie O'Gorman, District Administrator;
Ms. Liz. McGrath, Staff Officer.

Health Service Executive:
Ms. Kate Killeen White, Chief Officer, HSE CHO Area 6;
Ms. Barbara Murphy, Head of Service for Older People South East Community Care.

Department of Health:
Mr. John O'Neill, Assistant Principal, Services for Older People;
Ms. Kate Mitchell, Special Advisor to Minister Butler;
Mr. Pádraig Kelly, Private Secretary to Minister for Mental Health & Older People.

WELCOME: Minister Butler welcomed everyone to the meeting and a round of introductions ensued. Noting that there were some technical difficulties preventing Councillors O'Meara and Fitzgerald logging on at the commencement of the meeting, and given the time constraints, Minister Butler commenced proceedings inviting the Councillors to put their questions to her and she would answer them in turn.

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Cllr. Imelda Goldsboro:

Cllr. Goldsboro thanked the Minister for facilitating the meeting and wished to put on record that she was appalled by the online abuse endured by the Minister and by the fact that protests were happening in the Ministers home village for the last 5/6 weekends which she considered unacceptable. She posed a number of questions to the Minister as follows:

- Could the Minister outline in detail why the hospital needed to close?
- It was accepted that the hospital was over 200 years old but were there any measures that could be undertaken in order that it could reopen?
- When would the revised services earmarked for the hospital be up and running?
- Referring to several fundraising efforts undertaken by the people of Carrick-on-Suir over the years to assist with the running costs of hospital, she queried whether the Minister could confirm that this money was held in a bank account?

She stated that the kitchen in St. Brigid's was being used by Meals on Wheels to prepare food and that this facility was no longer available.

Cllr. Goldsboro concluded by thanking the Minister for what she had delivered in the county citing the Crisis House, the Jigsaw Project and Tipperary University Hospital and stated that those projects were much appreciated.

Minister Butler invited Ms. Kate Killeen White to respond.

**Ms. Kate
Killeen White**

Ms. Killeen White, Chief Officer, HSE CHO Area 6, stated that when Covid-19 emerged, the health services had to adopt different protocols around isolation, in-patient services etc., and it had been necessary for the HSE to assess all services and determine what was appropriate. Being aware of the challenges presented by St. Brigid's, decisions were made in the context of its suitability and the level of work required to bring it up to standard and regrettably it was too great for it to be feasible.

However, the enhanced Community Care Programme was progressing and when completed, the facility would reopen to deliver that programme, which would see specialist teams for managing chronic illnesses and an enhanced community care plan.

The sum of €90,000 was held on account and the HSE were in the process of contacting the 206 people who had donated money. Donors would be given the options of being refunded or to contribute the sum to services for older people within the community. However, the recent cyber-attack had hampered efforts to contact donors but the process would continue nonetheless.

**Cllr. David
Dunne:**

Cllr. Dunne thanked the Minister for meeting with the Carrick-on-Suir elected members. He informed her that he was involved in the action group and while explaining the depth of feeling among the protesters which led to their decision to take the protest to her home town, he stressed that he didn't condone any personal abuse by

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social media warriors. He then posed the following questions:

- Could the Minister confirm that the hospital was HIQA compliant prior to the most recent report which condemned the building?
- Could a copy of the report, it being the basis of the decision, be made available to the elected Members, as recently requested under FOI?
- Could an independent report on the costings involved be procured?

Cllr. Dunne stated that any old building could be made fit for purpose and cited the Carrick-on-Suir Town Hall as an example. He also stated that the hospital in Clonmel was older than St. Brigid's and it was still in use.

Cllr. Dunne also stated for the record that no contact was made by the HSE to Meals on Wheels, whereas €20,000 was allocated to the Day-care Centre in order to continue the service.

Cllr. Dunne noted that the Primary Care Centre was only at 50% capacity, and suggested it could be used as a vaccination centre. He also noted that the hospice rooms were suites which complied with modern standards and were considered to be a "home from home" where patients could die with dignity. He enquired that now closed what would be put in place instead of that facility? He suggested that there was still time to reverse the decision, concluding that Carrick needed its hospital, as the heartbeat of the town.

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**Ms. Barbara
Murphy HSE:**

Ms. Barbara Murphy, Head of Service for Older People South East Community Care, responded to Cllr. Dunne noting that the HSE was working in a family-centred way. This was the correct way to ensure patient safety. The HSE had determined that it was not viable to make the building fit for purpose and she further stated that the decision to close the hospital would not be reversed.

Regarding the poor take up at the Primary Care Centre, Ms. Murphy explained that during the pandemic people preferred to stay at home rather than go to a hospital setting for respite.

Regarding the F.O.I. request, Ms. Murphy indicated that the H.S.E. had responded to same with the technical aspect of the request having been referred to technical services; however, all F.O.I. requests had been stood down due to the recent cyber-attack.

Ms. Murphy HSE, informed the meeting that the provision of Meals on Wheels continued throughout the pandemic and that funding had been provided to Meals on Wheels by the HSE.

She stated that HSE were engaging with South Tipperary Hospice to provide hospice care, and noted that 2 beds were allocated for this purpose in St. Anthony's in Clonmel. In addition, they were working to provide a bed at Greenhill Nursing Home and she noted that respite services were just now reopening; HSE were working through their respite list with priority being given to emergency cases, followed by referrals from the Public Health Nurse etc. She alluded to the strict regime

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still in place around visiting – 14-day isolating, testing, even for those who were fully vaccinated - with guidelines followed to the letter.

**Minister Mary
Butler T.D.:**

Minister Butler informed the meeting that the final decision to close St. Brigid's Hospital was taken by the HSE and HIQA because it was no longer compliant. She was appointed to her office on the 1st July 2020 and became aware of 2014, 2016 and 2017 reports which were never in the public domain. The 2017 report stated that the provider was failing to comply with fire safety regulations with inadequate arrangements for evacuation in the event of a fire. When told that neither the HSE nor HIQU could guarantee patient safety at St. Brigid's, she had no alternative course of action. Referring to the conditions that prevailed with 76cm between each bed in the male ward and no showering facilities, she spoke of the absence of facilities to 'coffin' a deceased patient and that such deceased persons had to be removed to the ground floor for that purpose in a body bag, which she considered to be most undignified.

In that context, the Minister posed the following question to the Councillors. Would they be happy to have a member of their family or loved one reside in St. Brigid's knowing that the report stated that it wasn't fit for purpose and that the safety of the patients couldn't be guaranteed? She enquired if Councillors were prepared to keep fighting for a facility that could ultimately result in loss of life?

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The Minister stated that she was happy to meet with relevant representatives regarding her portfolio. I.N.M.O. sought a meeting with her on the 22nd January 2021 resulting in her meeting with nurses on 2nd February 2021. There were adequate placements available at Greenhill Nursing Home, Dungarvan Community Care, St. Anthony's Clonmel, St. Theresa's Clogheen. She referred to a recent discussion with Dr. Richard Roche-Nagle where he informed her that the closure of St. Brigid's had not adversely affected any patient as they had been accommodated elsewhere.

She further stated that a positive announcement was imminent in relation to the primary care centre. However, she could not elaborate at this juncture as the matter was commercially sensitive.

**Ms. Kate
Killeen White
HSE:**

Supporting the Minister's stated position, Ms. Killeen White said that difficult as it was, the decision to close was the right thing to do. She appreciated that it was an emotive subject, but St. Brigid's was not fit for purpose for in-patient services and they simply could not make it fit. Advice obtained was that there was not a viable option to do substantial works. She reiterated that the decision was made and would not be reversed. The building would be utilised as a base for community care, working in a patient-centred way like it was delivered right across the South East.

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Cllr. Kevin O'Meara:

[Having resolved technical issues] Cllr. O'Meara joined the meeting and he and thanked Minister Butler for meeting with the Carrick-on-Suir Municipal District Councillors. Accepting that the HSE and HIQA had made the decision to close the hospital before her time, he expressed the aspiration that a solution could be found.

- He asked that given the findings of the 2017 report, why were the deficiencies not acted on since then? His big concern was that the closure effected under cover of COVID, left a bad taste.
- He queried how many non-conformances occurred between 2017 and 2020?

Cllr O'Meara put forward that the home support system didn't work for everybody, and declared that COVID wasn't going to last forever and that people needed to be accommodated in their own areas. A situation of relying on the private sector was not desirable - not only in Carrick on Suir - and he informed the Minister that Clogheen was over an hour's travel time from Mullinahone. He urged her to reconsider the closure, particularly for hospice and palliative care services.

Minister Mary Butler T.D.:

Responding to Councillor O'Meara, Minister Butler stated that St. Martin's Hospital in Portlaw was closed and the decision to do so had to be accepted having regard to patient safety.

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She pointed out that she would be remiss in her duty as a Minister if she allowed patients to be in a facility which was deemed to be unsafe.

She explained that caring for elderly people now required them to have their own room with en-suite facilities.

Cllr. Kieran Bourke:

Cllr. Bourke addressed the assembly in turn and thanked the Minister for agreeing to the meeting. He noted that Minister Butler was the only Minister who had answered his correspondence; neither the Taoiseach nor Minister Steven Donnelly had responded to his communication. He alluded to a meeting held with the 9 Fianna Fáil Councillors arranged through the 'Whip' in December 2020, wherein Minister Donnelly had made a commitment and reassured that the hospital would reopen with a reduction from 16 to 12 beds by reducing the 2 no. 5-bed wards on first floor to 3-beds each. Councillor Bourke then posed the following questions:

- Who commissioned the most recent report to be carried out and when was it requested?
- Was the report sought after Cllr Bourke and Mr. Jackie Cahill T.D. had spoken with Minister Donnelly in July 2020?
- Why weren't HIQA requested to report as heretofore.
- Who made the decision to close the hospital?

Councillor Bourke stated that a decision was made to close the hospital some time ago and that COVID was a convenient excuse.

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He also stated that having regard to a report by HIQA in 2018 that it was his firm belief as an experienced builder that the hospital could be saved and that with political will it could so happen. Quoting from that report he stated that the inspector noted there were "*sufficient resources employed towards delivery of safe and good quality care*" and that "*overall, residents' health and social needs were maintained to a good standard.*"

He informed the meeting that of the 28 categories which formed the criteria for assessing the unit, 3 were not complied with. These were 'residents rights', 'the premises' and 'personal possessions.' The writer recommended that the hospital should be located on a green field site. Councillor Bourke informed the meeting that there was an 8-acre site in public ownership at the back of St. Brigid's. He also referred to the adjoining carpark acquired to meet the needs of the Primary Care Centre which could be incorporated as necessary.

Cllr Bourke stated that if the political will were there, St. Brigid's could reopen, citing the provision of a second 'cat scan' recently procured for Waterford University Hospital as a case in point, whereas initially it could not be provided. In concluding, Cllr. Bourke made an impassioned plea to the Minister, stating that he too was on the receiving end of abuse from a certain element which he considered to be spineless. He chose to ignore that element as genuine people knew that he and his Council colleagues would try to secure the future of St. Brigid's Hospital.

Minister Mary Butler T.D.:

Minister Butler responded that she was aware of the meeting which took place between Minister Donnelly, Micheál Martin and Deputy Cahill, to which she hadn't been invited. She also stated that she was informed by Deputy Cahill that the Taoiseach had contacted Councillor Bourke. Minister Butler stated that while it was the role of HIQA to inspect medical facilities she emphasised that the quality of care received by patients of St. Brigid's was never in question. She reiterated the following points:

- the requirement to introduce single occupancy rooms as a result of COVID and how COVID was particularly challenging for the health services;
- that St. Brigid's would still play a significant role in the provision of health services; and
- that the HSE was in the process of rolling out a statutory home care provision as 99% of people wished to live and die in their own homes.

Ms. Kate Killeen White, HSE:

Ms. Kate Killeen White indicated that HSE made as many changes as were possible to meet HIQA requirements and it was really important to emphasise that there was never a question around the quality of care provided to patients, but that structurally it was not viable.

Ms. Killeen White refuted the assertion that the Covid pandemic provided an 'excuse' to close the facility and countered that the pandemic was nothing short of a nightmare and never a convenient cloak. She recalled the catastrophic situation of 800 daily cases, and with

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195 out of 575 nursing homes affected by the outbreak, having to draft in the Army to offer supports. That was the situation then, as contrasted with the previous two weeks where there was one nursing home outbreak. She concluded that the old 'nightingale ward system was just not suitable in present day healthcare delivery.

Minister Mary Butler T.D.:

Minister Butler stated that there were 50 single rooms to be provided in Clonmel which was a significant investment going in to South Tipperary. Knowing the role of St. Brigid's in Carrick on Suir's health care, she stated that she had fought 'tooth and nail' to keep it open. However, with 7 new jobs being provided under the Community Care network in Quarter 3 of 2021, St. Brigid's would still play a significant role.

She stated that she was presently looking at a plethora of measures for older persons right across the board, extending 'Fair Deal' scheme to permit persons to avail of home care, responding to demand identified where 99% of older persons wanted to live and die at home.

Cllr. Mark Fitzgerald:

[Having resolved technical issues, Cllr. Fitzgerald joined the meeting]. Cllr. Fitzgerald thanked Minister Butler for meeting with the elected representatives. It appeared to Councillor Fitzgerald that the meeting was the 'final nail in the coffin' and suggested that it could be the end of what all present were fighting for.

Cllr. Fitzgerald deplored what he described as an awful loss to the area and in particular with regard to respite

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facilities locally. He stated that if there was a political will then St. Brigid's could reopen even if it had reduced bed capacity as travelling long distances at such a sensitive time in people's lives would be regrettable.

Condemning the personal abuse to which Minister Butler had been subjected, Councillor Fitzgerald stated that all present had gone into politics to better our communities and it was most unfair to be subjected to such grief and torment.

He enquired about the repurposing of the facility and the timeframe for same?

Minister Mary Butler T.D.:

In response, Minister Butler stated that recruitment was currently underway and it was envisaged that enabling works would be undertaken to the ground floor in quarter 3 of 2021 to provide the first Community Health network in Ireland in accordance with the Sláintecare objective of 'right care - right time - right place'.

Querying if any of the Council Members would be prepared to place a loved one in a facility such as St. Brigid's in its current condition and knowing that it was unsafe, she stated her belief that all would answer 'no' and she stated that it would be remiss of her to let the matter continue. She understood that when it came to St. Brigid's, many people were unhappy.

Minister Butler thanked the members for their comments in relation to the personal abuse that she had experienced and stated that some of it had most certainly "crossed the line." She pointed out that some

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of those involved were promoting "Darkness into Light" on the one hand and engaging in such online activity on the other. Thankfully she possessed robust, good mental health.

Cllr. David Dunne:

Councillor Dunne again addressed the meeting, stating that he would revert to his campaigners in good faith, notwithstanding that there remained unanswered questions. He informed the Minister of his intention to continue with the campaign against the closure of the hospital, and stated that he would reflect on the best way to use to €90,000 available. He believed that it was still possible to continue with fundraising to reopen the hospital and oversee the project. In the meantime, there were no premises available to Meals on Wheels.

Minister Mary Butler T.D.:

Minister Butler countered that Cllr. Dunne was not being realistic as St. Brigid's was the property of the state and it would be reconfigured for delivery of Community Care. She suggested that in maintaining his position, he was 'burying his head in the sand'.

In finishing the meeting, Minister Butler said that she had set out her position unequivocally. She considered herself to be a straight-talker and was conscious that some would be disappointed; however, she looked forward to delivering some positive news in the next few months, noting that the HSE had allocated €10million to the provision of day care centres and informed that 101 such centres would open in July. She stated that she

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was delighted to facilitate the meeting and thanked all for their participation.

The meeting concluded.



District Administrator



Cathaoirleach

22 JULY 2021

Date

