



Oifig an Stiúrthóra Cúnta Náisiúnta
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Deputy Paul Kehoe,
Dáil Eireann,
Leinster House,
Dublin 2.

16th September 2024

PQ 28898/24: To ask the Minister for Health the role the HSE has in ensuring that people have access to a GP in their community and in recruiting a new GP/practice in an area that does not have any GP service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. – Paul Kehoe

Dear Deputy Kehoe,

I refer to your parliamentary question, which was passed to the HSE for response.

Current Vacancies

As of July 2024, there are 24 GMS GP vacancies across the system. 13 of these vacancies are based in rural areas with 11 vacancies in urban locations. These posts are currently covered with Locum GPs or Doctor in Charge arrangements while permanent solutions are being pursued. The HSE is committed to continuing to engage with the relevant GP stakeholders in ensuring the sustainability of these GP posts and practices.

The HSE and Department of Health (DoH) have been working closely with both the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) and Irish College of General Practice (ICGP) in supporting investment in General Practice and in responding in particular to the challenges faced in isolated rural and urban disadvantaged communities. A number of initiatives (set out below) are currently being implemented with a view to enhancing GP access across the country.

GP Agreement 2023 – Rural Practices and Areas of Urban Deprivation

Following a period of negotiations, the DoH, the HSE and the IMO signed an agreement in July 2023. A number of measures are included in the GP Agreement 2023, in relation to maintaining GMS GP services in isolated rural and urban disadvantaged communities, including pilot initiatives whereby qualifying GMS practices, where a vacancy has arisen due to retirement /resignation/death of the outgoing single-handed GP, may form an affiliation with a larger practice involving two or more GMS GPs within the nearest population centre.

In addition to providing financial supports and initiatives to address the current challenges in filling GMS vacancies in rural and urban disadvantaged areas in particular, the 2023 GP Agreement also provides for increased supports to GPs to maintain and increase capacity in general practices. This includes enhanced Practice Support Subsidies and the introduction of a new form of Practice Grant towards the cost of employing additional practice staff and/or increase in hours of existing practice staff, together with the introduction of a new role of GP Practice Assistant. The 2023 Agreement also makes provision for additional supports for GMS GP practices in rural communities in sourcing locum cover, for periods of approved leave.



International Medical Graduate Programme for Rural General Practice and Areas of Urban Deprivation

The International Medical Graduates (IMG) Programme, is an initiative supported by the ICGP, HSE and the IMO aimed at expanding GP workforce in rural and urban disadvantaged areas.

In 2023, a total of 121 candidates were successfully enrolled to the scheme, 75 of which had commenced in general practice by year end. As of April 2024, 141 candidates have been offered places with 100 working in General Practice. Recruitment is ongoing, with the aim of recruiting 250 doctors in 2024. This has a very immediate impact on GP shortages. The new additional posts will work in General Practice for a 2 year period, following which they can take up an Irish GMS contract. The initiative is targeted at rural areas, areas of urban deprivation and those difficult to fill posts in various geographical locations across the country. The initiative in 2023 has helped ease the pressures on GP Practices in the Southwest, Southeast, Midlands and Western seaboard.

Expansion of GP Training

The HSE is working closely with the ICPG on a range of measures to expand the GP Workforce and in developing a sustainable model of General Practice for the future in line with Sláintecare. GP training places have increased from an intake of 259 in 2022 to 286 in 2023 and an intake of 350 in 2024. The total number of trainees undertaking the four-year programme will increase from the current 1,044 to 1,300 in 2026 – a 25% increase. Funding has been provided in the 2024 budget to enable the HSE and the ICGP to implement this initiative at pace.

General Practice Strategic Review

The Minister for Health has established a Strategic Review of General Practice. The Review is being led by the DoH, with support from the HSE and input from key stakeholders, including the IMO and ICGP. The Review is examining the issues affecting general practice including GP training, GP capacity, Out of Hours services reform, the eHealth Agenda, and the financial support model for general practice. The Review will then identify the arrangements necessary to improve the current system of GP care as part of a primary care-focused health service and in line with the Sláintecare vision on access. Following its conclusion, a report will be presented to the Minister for Health giving an assessment of the challenges affecting general practice and setting out the actions needed to provide for a more sustainable GP service.

Meetings of the Joint Department of Health/HSE Steering Group are ongoing and engagement with relevant stakeholders is currently underway.

I trust this is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Geraldine Crowley,
Assistant National Director,
Enhanced Community Care Programme & Primary Care Contracts