**Welcome by Minister at the start of the National Oversight Committee**

* I welcome the opportunity to introduce myself as the Minister of State for with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy. I am aware of the political significance of the national drugs strategy, as a multi-agency strategy that addresses a key challenge for Irish society and especially, for the individuals, families and communities that are impacted by drugs and alcohol misuse.
* I am glad to meet with the National Oversight Committee for the national drugs strategy. I appreciate the central role of this committee, as the official stakeholder forum for state, voluntary and community organisations involved in the national drugs strategy. It is important that there is a single high-level forum where all stakeholders can come together. The key features I see for the committee are accountability for delivering on actions, respect for individual views, and a commitment to working together.
* Unfortunately, the requirements of holding the NOC meeting in a virtual format limit my capacity to greet members in a face-to-face manner. However, I hope to have the opportunity to meet with stakeholders on an individual basis over the next few months, beginning with the drug and alcohol task forces next week. I also have the opportunity to visit drug and alcohol services.
* My main focus is to oversee the implementation of the national drugs strategy. The Programme for Government gives a strong endorsement of the national drugs strategy as the roadmap for a health-led response to drug and alcohol misuse. A flagship action in the Programme for Government is the implementation of the health diversion programme for people who are found in the possession of drugs for personal use. We need to connect people who use drugs with the health services, especially those in addiction, to provide a pathway to recovery.
* Covid-19 has posed a major challenge to the provision of drug and alcohol services, as well as highlighting the health and social vulnerabilities of people of use drugs. I have been impressed by the adaptability of services to meet the needs of clients. The improvements in the delivery of opioid substitution treatment services have been critical in minimising the impact of Covid-19 among this vulnerable group. Similarly, the health supports provided by services for people who are homeless and misuse drugs and alcohol have been very significant in protecting this cohort.
* I would, at the outset of the meeting, like to commend the hard work and dedication of all those involved in the delivery of health and social services during this difficult time.
* You will be aware that on Tuesday Government published its recovery and resilience plan for living with Covid-19. The plan details the measures being put in place to deliver health and social care services, including a detailed plan for the winter period with an investment of €600 million. The plan also highlights the restoration of drug and alcohol services, including com­munity-based services, residential programmes and recovery support groups. The Department of Health is working with task forces and voluntary organisation to put in place a framework to restore services. I have authorised additional funding to support this work.
* I am aware of the need to provide additional resources to support the implementation of the national drugs strategy. This will be a particular challenge in the 2021 Estimate process, given the huge demands on the health services. Ensuring the best use of existing resources is also important and is something we must do given the evolving nature of the drug and alcohol misuse.
* We have a full agenda for our meeting today, covering a lot of issues that are relevant to the strategy at national and international level.