

# FÓRSA CALLS FOR FAST-TRACKING EXPANSION OF COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH STAFFING

Fórsa has called on the Health Service Executive to fast-track plans to recruit 7,000 community-based health staff over the next three years, as part of the commitment which was set out in the Government's Sláintecare Strategic Action Plan 2021-23.

The union's Head of Health, Éamonn Donnelly, said health and social care professionals (HSCPs) were concerned that no timeline had been put on recruitment targets in the action plan's list of 'key projects and deliverables.'

Addressing Fórsa's Biennial Health & Welfare Divisional Conference on 26 May, he said that an additional 1,600 HSCPs were needed over the next 18 months to meet ambitious community and primary healthcare commitments set out in the action plan.

These include the establishment of 96 community healthcare networks to enable the integration of primary and acute hospital-based services.

The online conference also heard demands that the Government implements its commitment to appoint a specialist HSCP advisor in the Department of Health to ensure that physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, social work, social care and other professional services were placed at the centre of health planning.

"Long waiting times for therapy services mean long-term damage to health, particularly for children. The queues for these vital services like speech therapy and physio have already lengthened because HSCPs and other staff were diverted to essential Covid-related services for the best part of a year.

"More staff are needed to populate the community-based services needed to deliver on the commitments in Sláintecare," he told conference delegates.

## HEALTHCARE NETWORKS

Donnelly said Fórsa welcomed the planned introduction of 96 community healthcare networks. "We are already



*"The introduction of the community health networks is key to Sláintecare's ambition to boost primary care and bring services closer to patients and their communities" – Éamonn Donnelly, Fórsa's Head of Health.*

in talks about the creation of 48 enhanced community care networks, and expect to reach an agreement, through negotiation, that will see these developed as community health networks.

"Once implemented, they will be proof of political will to move to a community-led health service, with less pressure on overburdened acute hospitals. But we need to see movement on this and other initiatives so that patients can be offered the right care in the right place at the right time, and with a minimum of complexity."

Fórsa's Head of Health noted that quality community health services will not become a reality unless HSCPs are at the centre of planning and delivery.

"Their interventions will lead the drive towards better quality of life for vulnerable patients. The appointment of a specialist HSCP advisor in the Department would be one important step in that direction – and I see no reason for more delay," he said.

The union claims that the

introduction of community networks should not resemble previous health reforms, which Fórsa notes were characterised by disruptive changes to structures with little tangible benefit to patients or communities.

"We've seen many of these so-called reform programmes over the past two decades, and it's a tradition we need to break with. The introduction of the community health networks is key to Sláintecare's ambition to boost primary care and bring services closer to patients and their communities.

"It needs to be backed up with the necessary staffing resources – including the timely recruitment of 1,600 additional HSCPs – and a commitment to the integration of hospital and community health services with easier access to services for public patients," he said.

Fórsa represents over 30,000 health workers including health and social care professionals, clerical, administrative, management and technical staff. ([www.forsahealth.ie](http://www.forsahealth.ie))