



## National Meals on Wheels Network

Pre-Budget 2024 Submission.



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## Introduction

Meals on wheels' services were at the forefront of supporting older people in the community during the Covid 19 Pandemic, with some providers reporting a 200% increase in demand for the service. While the country is now getting back to normal, providers, while not seeing the level of demand for the service reach the numbers experienced during the pandemic, are now finding themselves increasingly under pressure due to the current cost of living crisis and other cohorts of the population looking to access the service. These include people suffering from mental health conditions, trauma, food poverty and other conditions impacting their ability to cook a meal for themselves. Another huge pressure on providers is the current structure of their HSE Section 39 funding process. This is currently on an annual basis with inconsistencies existing between different CHO regions in terms of distribution and receipt of funds. Ireland's intake of Ukrainian refugees and their needs are also being met by a large proportion of providers outside of the current model of their Section 39 funding. This is the very nature of the community, voluntary and not for profit sector in Ireland with all stepping up to the mark and refusing to leave anyone behind. It is also important to note that there are other providers not funded by the HSE delivering this service who are fully voluntary or receive funding from elsewhere.

The Government have committed to the delivery of healthcare in the community as part of *Sláintecare* and supporting older people to age in their own home with a new statutory Home Care Scheme. In addition, the HSE National Service Plan for 2023 <sup>1</sup> states that the Enhanced Community Care Programme (ECC) will continue to roll out nationally to ensure more people can access healthcare in their local community rather than within the acute hospital setting. These measures include the continued development of 96 Community Healthcare Networks, each servicing a population of c.50,000 and 30 community specialist teams for older persons.

**Key Objective 3: *Continue to provide new and enhanced integrated models of home and community support enabling increased access to care and supports in the community - the plan states that this can be achieved by expanding the delivery of the Meals on Wheels service through secured funding. This aligns with the Government's objectives for a more community-based healthcare service.***

The role the Meals on Wheels organisations play in supporting individuals to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible cannot be underestimated. With sufficient resources these organisations can enable people to be discharged from hospitals earlier, and even prevent admission to hospital in the first instance, saving the state significant

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<sup>1</sup> [national-service-plan-2023.pdf \(hse.ie\)](https://www.hse.ie/eng/our-services/primary-care-and-prevention/national-service-plan-2023)





amounts every year. There is now ample opportunity to develop this service and make it part of a suite of community care services and better integrate it into the overall healthcare system.

*“Meals on Wheels is so much more than a nutritious meal – it is a monitoring service, an opportunity for social contact. I want to complement Irish Rural Link and Meals on Wheels for their phenomenal initiative that is hugely important. Supporting it aligns with Sláintecare and the preference of the 82% of older people who want to age at home. Meals on Wheels is part of the wraparound supports needed by those who continue to live at home, not based on where you live but available to all who need it”.* (Minister Mary Butler Minister of State for Older People at Irish Rural Link’s Supporting Older People to Live Independently Webinar, November 2020).

### **National Meals on Wheels Network**

Under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link (IRL), the National Meals on Wheels Network was established in 2015 with the overall aim to provide a local, community-led professional facility to assist people who require services to maintain optimum health, independence with strong life-extending possibilities.

IRL encourages its various members to form single-issue networks within the umbrella of the organisation. The objectives of the National Meals on Wheels Network include;

- To advocate for a national standardised meals on wheels’ service which provides a system all organisations can adhere to.
- To ensure members have adequate resources to deliver a professionally produced nutritious meal to their clients. To advise and advocate the Government and other agencies which influence the delivery of meals on wheels and ancillary services.
- To meet the future demands of network members by assisting in the development of their services.
- To develop the organisation in a manner that is inclusive and participatory to all meals on wheels organisations.
- To develop a voluntary professional meals-on-wheels service to a high standard and to create a template that will be recognised and given a quality national rating.

In September 2021, IRL launched its new Meals on Wheels Network website together with an interactive map of service providers across the country. This map, which is the first of its kind for Meals on Wheels services in Ireland, allows people to find a service in their local





area, while also identifies gaps in services and if a nearby service has the capacity to deliver to that area. The website is also a valuable resource for providers as it allows for sharing of knowledge and access to suppliers and other resources. More details available on [www.mealsonwheelsnetwork.ie](http://www.mealsonwheelsnetwork.ie)

The National Meals on Wheels Network appointed a dedicated Development Officer – Tracey Noone - to oversee the network and its members and to provide the support, advice, guidance and active advocacy and lobbying to achieve its objectives. The development officer has undertaken several actions to bring the network together through training and peer mentoring and data has been gathered to establish what is happening on the ground.



## Summary of Budget 2024 Calls

Issues	Calls
Funding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The introduction of multi-annual core funding specifically for meals on wheels to allow all providers to budget adequately for their service.</li> <li>• Increased multi-annual funding to include application for               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Staffing Costs</li> <li>○ Meal delivery cost contributions (to cover petrol &amp; diesel costs)</li> <li>○ Meal on wheels' specific insurance costs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• A 7% increase in meals on wheels funding in line with current and future rates of inflation.</li> <li>• A restructure of the Section 39 grant level agreement application process.</li> </ul>
Procurement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to the HSE Procurement process for all Section 39 funded providers.</li> </ul>
Cost of Living Crisis and Inflation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A continuation of the Inflationary Fund into 2024 to Section 39 funded providers in line with current and future rates of inflation.</li> <li>• Simplification of the Community and Voluntary Energy Support Scheme (CVESS) for providers not funded through the HSE.</li> </ul>
Volunteers and Staffing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The protection of employment schemes and call for the payments to be increased in line with minimum wage to attract people onto schemes and retain people for the duration of the scheme.</li> <li>• Permanency of staff of Meals on Wheels to ensure sustainability of the service. Closing the up to 15% pay gap between the C&amp;V sector and identical jobs in public sector bodies.</li> <li>• Funding for training or working with ETBs to provide training for staff and volunteers.</li> <li>• A funding contribution for volunteers to recognise their input into the delivery of the meals on wheels' service.</li> </ul>
Environmental and Green Choices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providers to have the option of applying for funding towards the purchase of electric delivery vehicles, thus reducing the costs to the service and allowing providers to contribute to climate change.</li> <li>• Section 39 Funding and other funding streams to address the costs of environmentally friendly packaging.</li> </ul>
Gaps in the Service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All HSE Section 39 funded provider's details displayed on the National Meals on Wheels Network interactive map.</li> <li>• The Network to be more involved at local Older Persons Services level to address the gaps in the service.</li> </ul>



- The inclusion of the meals on wheels' service on the hospital discharge sheet nationally.

## Current Challenges

Ireland is returning to somewhat of a normality after the Covid 19 Pandemic, but meals on wheels' providers are facing new challenges on top of the ones already facing them pre Covid and during the pandemic.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has had a global effect on prices, especially for food products and energy costs. This has been felt significantly in Ireland with consumer prices rising by 6.6% in the 12 months to May 2023. This has led to providers having to, in some cases, increase the price of their meal and/or establish a waiting list for the service.

- Other cohorts of the population are now looking to access the service, which in turn is putting financial and human pressure on providers. Both the National Meals on Wheels Network and providers are receiving enquiries from homeless individuals, refugees, asylum seekers, families on the poverty line and individuals experiencing trauma. The nature of the community and voluntary sector is to step up to the plate and leave nobody behind, but this in turn is resulting in resources being stretched to breaking point.
- For providers who have paid staff there has been a 15% pay gap identified between C&V staff and staff doing the same jobs in public sector bodies. Staff are leaving the sector in search of better pay and conditions.
- The reliance on volunteers in the meals on wheels' sector has always been a challenge with much of this work being carried out by retired individuals. The emergence of the Covid 19 Pandemic resulted in a large proportion of volunteers having to leave the service to cocoon. Many of these volunteers have not returned to the sector. The meals on wheels' service are now facing the challenge of recruiting new volunteers and changing the model of their volunteer input.
- Ireland is facing a climate crisis along with the rest of the world. Under the government's Climate Action Plan 2021<sup>2</sup> Ireland is committed to a legally binding target of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than 2050, and a reduction of 51% by 2030. Meals on Wheels providers are eager to be part of this change to make their services more environmentally friendly and sustainable. However, to do this they require assistance in the form of training, financial resources and cheaper environmental products and services to be made available to them. Packaging and

<sup>2</sup> [gov.ie - Climate Action Plan 2021 - Securing Our Future \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications/2021-07-20-climate-action-plan-2021-securing-our-future/)





transport are two areas that the sector would greatly benefit from and allow providers to do their bit.

## Funding

Meals on Wheels providers are funded in a few different ways. Sources include HSE Section 39 grant agreements, Pobal Dormant Accounts and Community Services Programme funding, National Lottery Funding (once off only), CLAR and other various Government Department and agency grants. Despite the different types of funding sources available, none are adequate to sustain the service without providers having to supplement income through their own local fundraising activities and/or offering additional services to the elderly and vulnerable, resulting in a vicious circle of additional financial pressure. Many providers would have lost their additional fundraising capability throughout the pandemic, much of which would have been carried out again by volunteers. Online fundraising is now popular among many community and voluntary organisations, but in many cases the knowledge and skillset doesn't exist in the organisation to avail of the benefits of the digital platform.

HSE Section 39 funding supports many providers around the country, but again there are many inconsistencies evident in how this funding is distributed in each CHO area and the time the funding is received by the provider. This funding is allocated on a yearly basis, with an application deadline for each CHO area. However, not all providers are receiving their funding at the beginning of the year, with one provider informing the Network that their Section 39 funding for 2023 only came through in the first 2 weeks of June 2023.

This current funding model places huge pressures on providers in that they are unable to budget and plan sufficiently for the coming year due to the varied dates of receipt of funds. This in turn is jeopardising the sustainability of this essential service.

The National Meals on Wheels Network welcomed the funding secured by Minister Mary Butler, T.D in Budget 2023 and the allocation of an Inflationary Fund to Section 39 providers to help alleviate the pressures being experienced by the cost of living and inflation crisis. The Network also welcomed the additional €1.75M funding for meals on wheels' services announced by the Minister in May 2023. However, there is little clarity around how this extra funding is to be distributed and how much is available, with many providers having received no notification regarding same and it once again varying between different CHO areas.







The many sources of funding for the service requires a great deal of time and human resources to be allocated to the whole application process as does providers own fundraising efforts, thus affecting the delivery of the core service to the service user. Not all organisations have the knowledge or skillset available to apply for all grant and funding stream calls, therefore excluding a proportion of providers from the funding landscape.

## Procurement

The purchasing power and capability of the sector would be greatly enhanced if all Section 39 providers had access to HSE procurement. This would help alleviate the financial burden associated with purchasing various supplies for each organisation.

## Budget 2024 Calls:

- **The introduction of multi annual core funding specifically for the meals on wheels' service to allow all providers to budget adequately for their service. This will facilitate providers to allocate time more efficiently for the service and plan accordingly.**
- **Increased multi annual core funding to include application for staffing costs, contributions to meal delivery costs (petrol and diesel costs for delivery personnel some of whom use their own personal vehicles) and insurance costs associated with the meals on wheels' service. The Network suggests the proposal of a blanket discount specifically for the meals on wheels' service to be negotiated with the insurance sector.**
- **An increase in meals on wheels funding in line with current and future rates of inflation. The Network proposes a 7% increase to allow providers to address 2022-2023 inflationary costs currently putting the service under financial pressure and plan for future costs associated with the service.**
- **A restructure of the Section 39 grant level agreement application process. This is currently time consuming for both first time and existing applicants. This restructuring needs to address the simplification of the application process and separation of funding where other older persons' services are involved such as day care. The Network believes that this separation and simplification would aid the collection of data for the provider, the HSE and the National Meals on Wheels Network.**
- **Access to the HSE Procurement process for all providers being funded through Section 39 Grant level agreements to aid with the financial burden of goods and services.**





## Cost of Living Crisis and Inflation

The current cost of living crisis and rising inflation is putting providers under immense pressure with all across the network reporting increased prices affecting the delivery of their service. Providers are trying to absorb these costs to avoid increasing the cost of their meal to the service user. However, the results of a recent survey issued by the National Meals on Wheels Network has indicated that 51% of respondents have had to increase the cost of their meal to the client in the last 12 – 18 months. The average increase has been €1.00 to try and reduce the impact to the service user. Despite this minimum increase, providers are still trying to absorb high costs with many having to consider a further increase to ensure the continuation of their service.

Consumer prices have continued to increase in the past 12 months, rising by 6.6% in the 12 months to May 2023. (CSO, 2023). Prices continued to increase in energy and staple foods, with electricity increasing by 34.7% and Gas by 47.4% in the year, energy sources Meals on Wheels providers are dependent on to make their meals. While there was a fall in the price of petrol and diesel in the 12 months to May, with excise duty reapplied to these fuels, they have since increased. Prices of staple foods such as bread, butter and milk rose by 12.4%, 13% and 18.9% respectively in the year, with the price of beef and poultry increasing by 7.6% and 13.1% respectively. May Consumer Price Index.<sup>3</sup>

## Budget 2024 Calls

- **A continuation of the Inflationary Fund to Section 39 providers in line with the current and future rate of inflation to help with increased energy costs which will be experienced once again by providers this winter.**
- **Simplification of the CVESS if rolled out again for providers not funded through HSE Section 39 agreements.**

## Volunteers and Staffing

The service has always been volunteer reliant, particularly in the ageing population. However, many of these volunteers have not returned to the service as Ireland emerges from the pandemic, for several reasons. This in turn has put huge pressure on providers who are now stretched to continue delivering the service with a reduced volunteer input. Time pressures and limited resources in terms of finances, social media expertise and lack of

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexmay2023/>





knowledge in how to recruit new types of volunteers mean that some services have had to establish waiting lists for their service and others have had to restrict the distance and radius they can cover. Insurance costs are challenging for providers and their volunteers with no specific insurance policy currently available for the meals on wheels' sector.

These costs are inevitably resulting in elderly and vulnerable people being left without a meal, which in turn is increasing their risk of admission and/or readmission to hospital. The variation in structure of many meals on wheels organisations has an impact on the level of volunteer input. Some providers are completely volunteer led, others are structured in such a way where they may have some paid staff and others rely heavily on CE Scheme, TUS and/or Rural Social Scheme participants. However, whatever the structure of the provider, volunteers are a vital cog in the wheel of the delivery of the meals on wheels' service in Ireland.

#### Budget 2024 Calls:

- **The protection of employment schemes and call for the payments to be increased in line with minimum wage to attract people onto schemes and retain people for the duration of the scheme.**
- **Streamline of employment schemes to ensure equal pay for all on different schemes and continuity within employment terms and conditions and supervisors.**
- **Permanency of staff of Meals on Wheels to ensure sustainability of the service. People on employment schemes with Meals on Wheels providers to be encouraged to apply for the opportunity to gain employment within the service.**
- **Funding for training or working with ETBs to provide training for staff and volunteers is needed in Safeguarding, HACCP, First Aid, Health and Safety, Dementia, Patient Handling etc.**
- **Recognition of the volunteer input for the meals on wheels' service to include a funding contribution towards their own personal expenses incurred in the delivery of the service – most volunteers are using their own vehicles to deliver meals.**

#### Environmental and Green Choices

All of society is fully aware of the need to become more environmentally friendly and sustainable and meals on wheels' providers are conscious of the contribution that they can





make to climate change. Availing of Food Cloud as a community partner - Become a Charity Partner <sup>4</sup> is popular with many providers who are geographically located to do so. Some are growing their own fruit and vegetables, composting and using locally sourced produce. Packaging for providers is currently a huge expense, especially if they are reusable, recyclable or compostable. Electric vehicles are also something which many providers have indicated that they want to utilise, but the expense of purchase and the availability of charging points and refrigeration suitability for safe delivery of meals is proving to be yet another challenge.

#### Budget 2024 Calls:

- **The availability of environmental grants for the purchase and use of electric vehicles in the meals on wheels' delivery service. Providers near one another to look at the options of sharing the vehicle where possible and/or sharing with other relevant community groups.**
- **Section 39 Funding and other funding streams to address the costs of environmentally friendly packaging.**

#### Gaps in the Service

The National Meals on Wheels Network currently details approximately 260 providers nationally on its interactive map National Meals on Wheels Directory. <sup>5</sup> This is a facility whereby users can locate the nearest provider to the location they live in. However, not all meals on wheels' providers are listed and gaps exist in several counties to the extent that it is a challenge for the Network to always provide relevant direction and information for the enquirer. It would be beneficial to both the Network and the HSE if all providers, especially Section 39 funded providers were listed. It would also allow relevant data to be collected by both organisations which would feed into the future development of the service.

#### Budget 2024 Calls:

- **All HSE Section 39 funded provider's details displayed on the National Meals on Wheels Network interactive map.**
- **The Network to be more involved at local Older Persons Services level to address the gaps in the service in certain areas and find ways of bridging these gaps.**
- **The inclusion of the meals on wheels' service on the hospital discharge sheet nationally. This would aid the rehabilitation of the individual being discharged**

<sup>4</sup> <https://food.cloud/partnerships/charity-partnerships>

<sup>5</sup> [https://mealsonwheelsnetwork.ie/directory-meals\\_on\\_wheels/](https://mealsonwheelsnetwork.ie/directory-meals_on_wheels/)





**and highlight the importance of bridging the gaps that do exist in certain areas of the country.**

### **Sláintecare, The National Service Plan 2023 and Age Relevant Collaboration**

The meals on wheels sector are ideally placed to form part of the suite of community health and social care services in line with the priorities of the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2023<sup>6</sup> and the HSE National Service Plan 2023<sup>7</sup>. This will allow elderly and vulnerable individuals to remain living in their own homes with dignity and independence whilst being able to access all services within their communities. The National Meals on Wheels Network believes meals on wheels' providers are well placed to work together with HSE ICPOP teams and Age Friendly Alliance and others to be a significant part of the delivery of community care. The Network would welcome invitations for the National Meals on Wheels Network and its Advisory Group to meet with representatives from all relevant bodies and Government Departments to discuss the progression of this partnership and how meals on wheels' providers could participate in this community care model now and into the future.

### **Future Research and Development of the Meals on Wheels Model**

There has been no significant research carried out specifically for the meals on wheels sector since 2008<sup>8</sup>. The National Meals on Wheels Network would be willing to help facilitate more up to date research on the sector and its future development with suitable resources available to it and by working with other relevant bodies. This would aid the Network in developing a National Standard for the sector alongside a national guideline/toolkit available for all service providers nationally.

### **Irish Rural Link the Organization**

**Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a**

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6996b-slaintecare-implementation-strategy-and-action-plan-2021-2023/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/serviceplans/national-service-plan-2023.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> O'Dwyer, C. and Timonen, V., The Role and Future Development of Meals-on-Wheels Services for Older People in Ireland, Dublin, National Council on Ageing and Older People, 2008, 1-240





non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policymakers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

***'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'***

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities.

***'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'***

