

**Opening Statement by Dr Ambrose McLoughlin, Secretary General
of the Department of Health to the Committee of Public Accounts on
9th October, 2012**



Chairman and Members

Thank you for the invitation to attend today's meeting and to make an opening statement. I am joined today by my colleagues, Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa, Assistant Secretary and Mr David Smith, Principal Officer.

At the outset I would like to refer to correspondence received from the Clerk to the Committee of Public Accounts, dated 28th September 2012 and a further letter of clarification, dated 8th October 2012, in relation to today's meeting of the Committee. Enclosed with the letter of 8th October was a draft copy of a Committee of Public Accounts Report on the HSE, dated September 2012.

Both I and my officials in the Department of Health are fully aware of our responsibilities to assist the Committee of Public Accounts in carrying out its functions as set out in Standing Order 163 of Dáil Eireann, and to provide all appropriate information and co-operation in this regard. We are also aware of our responsibilities under the Committees of the Houses of the Oireachtas (Compellability, privileges and Immunities of Witnesses) Act, 1997 which expressly prohibits officials from commenting on Government policy. We are committed to complying with requirements to the best of our ability.

I am very conscious of the important role of the Oireachtas in the oversight and governance of Government Departments and State Agencies. Both the current and former Ministers for Health and myself and former Secretaries General have been fully committed to meeting our responsibilities in this regard. This is clearly evident from the record of attendances at Oireachtas Committees by Ministers for Health and/or Secretary Generals in recent years:

Committee of Public Accounts	Joint Committee on Health & Children	Select Committee
28 Jan 2010	9 Feb 2010	30 Mar 2010
7 Oct 2010	13 July 2010	19 July 2011
16 Dec 2010	25 Nov 2010	7 Dec 2011
27 Jan 2011	21 July 2011	17 May 2012
15 Dec 2011	6 Oct 2011	
	24 Nov 2011	
	8 Dec 2011	
	23 Feb 2012	
	22 Mar 2012	
	14 June 2012	
	20 Sept 2012	

I note that the subject matter for today's meeting is ' the Budgetary Situation in 2012', arising from meetings which the Committee had with the HSE on 26th January, 2012 and 28th June, 2012 to discuss the 2010 Annual Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General. You will be aware that the Department of Health was not required to attend either of these meetings and that the Committee adopted the C and AG's Report at the meeting on 28th June.

I understand that the Committee's draft report on the HSE, September 2012 which I only received yesterday evening, will also form the basis for today's meeting. The subject matter of this report is very much policy related and is outside the remit of the Committee's Standing Order 163(1)(A). The fact that the Committee is precluded from raising policy issues is acknowledged in its letter of 8th October. To address these issues, which are not yet the subject of a Report of the C and AG, would not be appropriate and I regret that I am precluded from engaging with the Committee on these matters.

The normal basis for engagement by the Secretary General of a Department with the Public Accounts Committee is in respect of his or her role as Accounting Officer. The Accounting Officer is held to account regarding the Appropriation Accounts

which have been examined by the Comptroller and Auditor General and any reports made by the C and AG in respect of those Accounts. The Secretary General of the Department of Health would be accountable in respect of the accounts of the Office of the Minister for Health (Vote 38). The Chief Executive Officer of the Health Service Executive is the Accounting Officer for the Appropriation Accounts of the Health Service Executive and is accountable to the PAC for the HSE's Appropriation Accounts which have been examined by the C and AG. On occasion if it is deemed appropriate the Department of Health may be represented at meetings of the PAC which are discussing the HSE's Accounts, though this is not always the case.

I will be happy to engage with the C and AG and with the Committee in a constructive, disciplined and structured manner in due course, in accordance with the process as described above and in response to a draft report prepared by the C and AG.

I have attended today's meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts to explain my position in person to the members. I look forward to engaging with both the Committee and with the C and AG as set out in the relevant legislation and Standing Orders.

Thank you