

THE HEALTH INVESTIGATION / THE HUMAN COST

TWICE THE MONEY.
STILL WAITING FOR A BED.

Ireland is spending more than twice as much on health as it did in 2015.
For patients who need a hospital bed overnight, capacity has barely kept pace.

+103%

public health spending,
2015 to 2024 [1]

+14.7%

acute inpatient beds in public
hospitals, 2015 to 2024 [2]

114,029

patients admitted without a bed
in 2025, 1,248 of them children [3]

Behind every number, a patient

A hospital trolley is not what any family hopes for when someone they love falls ill. Yet in 2025, nurses counted 114,029 patients admitted to hospital without a bed, including 1,248 children. [3]

Behind that total is a simple question: when someone in your family needs a bed, will there be one, staffed and ready?

“Persistent staffing gaps across the public health service are undermining their ability to deliver safe and timely care.”

Phil Ní Sheaghda, General Secretary, Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, 31 December 2025 [3]

The decade in numbers

Department of Health and CSO [1, 2, 4, 5, 6]

Measure	Then	Now	Change
Public health spending (2015 → 2024)	€14.3bn	€29.0bn	+103%
Health service staff, whole-time (2016 → 2025)	110,259	151,661	+37.5%
People aged 65 and over (2016 → 2026)	629,900	891,100	+41.5%
Total population (2016 → 2026)	4.74m	5.53m	+16.6%
Acute inpatient beds (2015 → 2024)	10,473	12,016	+14.7%

WHAT THAT MEANS PER PERSON

2.23

acute beds per 1,000 people in 2016

→

2.23

acute beds per 1,000 people in 2024

Beds grew only as fast as the population. There was no gain per person.

Spending is in cash terms, before inflation, and includes current and capital spending. Some of the rise reflects inflation, pay and Covid-era costs. Beds are in public acute hospitals; day-case beds rose faster, by 30.7%. Beds per 1,000 people calculated by The Irish Future. [1, 2, 4, 5, 6]

PAGE 2 / WHAT DID PATIENTS GET?

More money and more staff. Where did it show?

PAGE 3 / 3,438 EXTRA BEDS PROMISED

About 491 a year needed. About 171 a year delivered.

PAGE 4 / WHO WILL CARE FOR US?

1,000 more nursing home beds needed every year. Last year: 38 more.

SOURCES & READING

[1] Department of Health: Key Trends, Health service expenditure, Table 6.1 · [2] Department of Health: Key Trends, Hospital care, Table 3.1 · [3] INMO: TrolleyWatch 2025 statement, 31 December 2025 · [4] Department of Health: Key Trends, Health service employment, Table 5.1 · [5] Department of Health: Key Trends, Demographics, Table 1.2 · [6] CSO: Population and Migration Estimates, April 2026

Trolley figures use INMO definitions; the HSE publishes its own figures, counted differently.

A DECADE OF EXTRA SPENDING

MORE MONEY. MORE STAFF.

WHAT DID PATIENTS GET?

Spending per person rose from about €3,170 in 2016 to €5,390 in 2024. Beds per 1,000 people stayed at 2.23. The public deserves a clear account of what the money delivered.

Public health spending

Year	Capital	Total
2015	€398m	€14.28bn
2016	€423m	€15.00bn
2017	€465m	€15.78bn
2018	€545m	€16.85bn
2019	€689m	€18.03bn
2020	€942m	€21.23bn
2021	€1,052m	€22.99bn
2022	€1,220m	€24.83bn
2023	€1,112m	€26.27bn
2024	€1,343m	€29.02bn
Change	+238%	+103%

Current plus capital spending, in cash terms. Capital pays for buildings and equipment. Budget 2025 allocated €25.8bn for services; final 2025 spending is not yet published. [1, 2]

Acute hospital beds

Year	Day-case	Inpatient
2015	2,026	10,473
2016	2,140	10,592
2017	2,170	10,665
2018	2,240	10,856
2019	2,290	10,951
2020	2,290	11,048
2021	2,440	11,337
2022	2,477	11,581
2023	2,614	11,907
2024	2,648	12,016
Change	+30.7%	+14.7%

Public acute hospitals. Inpatient beds are for patients who stay overnight. The days patients spent in those beds rose 16.7%, faster than the beds themselves. [3]

Where the staff growth went

Staff group	2016 → 2025	Change
Medical & dental	9,723 → 15,198	+56.3%
Management & admin	16,767 → 25,223	+50.4%
Health & social care	15,364 → 22,525	+46.6%
Nursing & midwifery	35,835 → 48,759	+36.1%
Patient & client care	23,122 → 29,902	+29.3%
General support	9,448 → 10,054	+6.4%

Whole-time equivalents, HSE and Section 38 voluntary hospitals. The Department notes long-run comparisons are not fully valid because the service has been reorganised. [4]

A fair question, asked fairly

WHAT THE MONEY MAY HAVE IMPROVED

More day services, community care, medicines and specialist treatment mean more patients are treated without staying overnight. Those gains are real where they are documented.

WHAT REMAINS UNANSWERED

Which investments cut waiting times? How many funded posts are vacant? Which regions gained usable beds? How does the rise look after inflation and ageing?

A bed only helps when there are nurses and doctors to staff it. Over roughly the same decade, staff rose more than twice as fast as beds. So what is holding the beds back?

WE HAVE ASKED the Department of Health and the HSE for a breakdown of how the extra €14.7 billion a year was spent. We will publish their answer.

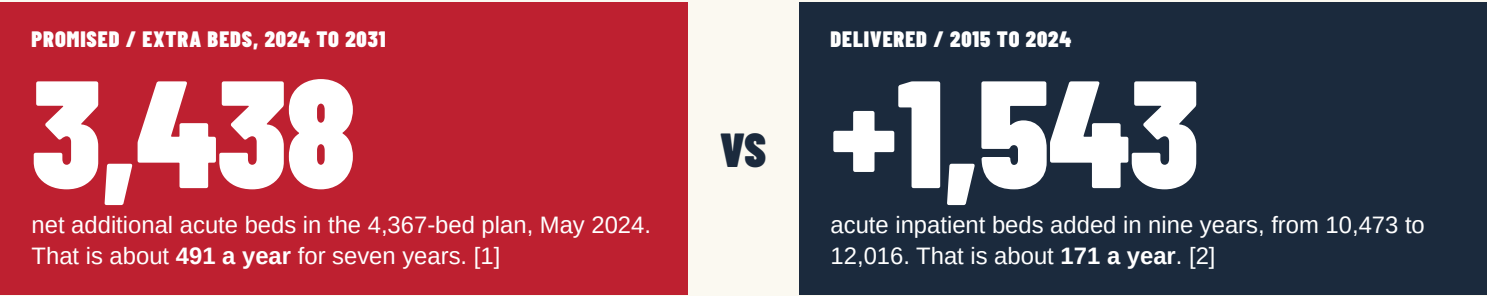
SOURCES & READING

[1] Department of Health: Key Trends, Health service expenditure, Table 6.1 · [2] Department of Health: Budget 2025 health allocation · [3] Department of Health: Key Trends, Hospital care, Table 3.1 · [4] Department of Health: Key Trends, Health service employment, Table 5.1
Spending per person and beds per 1,000 calculated by The Irish Future using CSO population estimates for April 2016 and April 2024.

THE BED PROMISE / PROMISED, BUILT, OPEN

4,367 BEDS PROMISED. HOW MANY ARE OPEN?

The Government’s 2024 plan promises 4,367 acute beds by 2031. Only 3,438 of them are extra beds; the rest replace old ones. At the pace of the last decade, even the extra beds would take until the mid-2040s.



The other 929 beds in the plan replace existing ones, including 500 at the new National Children’s and National Maternity Hospitals. The plan separately reports 1,218 beds delivered since 2020; the HSE’s published series shows 968 more acute inpatient beds in 2024 than in 2020. Only beds due by the end of 2026 are funded. [1, 2]

Why the difference matters

A replacement bed may be badly needed for safer, modern care. But it does not let a hospital admit one more patient. Counting it as new capacity would mislead.

The HSE’s 2026 service plan commits to **177 acute beds** and 428 community beds this year. They are different kinds of bed, and a commitment is not proof of delivery. [3]

The warnings were given

The State’s 2018 Capacity Review said Ireland needed about **2,600 extra acute beds by 2031** even with major reforms, and over 7,000 without them. Hospitals were running at about 95% full, against a safe norm of 85%. In 2019, Ireland’s hospitals were the fullest in the OECD. [4, 5]

“The reliance on surge beds, which are not properly staffed, is a cause of concern.”
Phil Ní Sheaghda, INMO, 31 December 2025 [6]

When there is no bed

INMO TrolleyWatch	Patients
January 2025, worst month on record	13,972
Admitted without a bed, all of 2025	114,029
of whom were children	1,248

CLOSE TO HOME
In November 2025, the INMO listed Midland Regional Hospital, Mullingar, among the hospitals with the largest rises in trolley numbers that year: up 40%. [7]

At 171 beds a year, the 3,438 extra beds would take about 20 years. That is the mid-2040s, not 2031.

THREE QUESTIONS EVERY TD SHOULD ANSWER

01 Which promised beds in my region are open, staffed and treating patients today?

02 Which of the plan’s beds are extra, and which replace existing ones?

03 Are the beds due from 2027 to 2031 funded?

SOURCES & READING
[1] Department of Health: 4,367-bed plan, 29 May 2024 · [2] Department of Health: Key Trends, Hospital care, Table 3.1 · [3] HSE: National Service Plan 2026 · [4] Health Manager: Health Service Capacity Review 2018 · [5] Health Manager: ESRI on bed capacity, June 2023 · [6] INMO: TrolleyWatch 2025 statement · [7] INMO, 14 November 2025
Yearly pace calculated by The Irish Future from the figures shown. January 2025 figure: Irish Examiner, 1 February 2025.

THE FUTURE EVERY FAMILY MUST PLAN FOR

WHO WILL CARE FOR US WHEN WE GROW OLD?

A hospital bed is only part of the story. Families also need home support, time to recover after hospital, and a nursing home place when home is no longer safe.

1 • MORE OF US ARE OLDER

891,100

people aged 65 and over in April 2026, up 30,000 in one year. More than a million by 2030. [1, 2]

▶

2 • MORE CARE AT HOME

28.7m hours

of home support in 2022. Nearly double, up to 54.9 million a year, needed by 2040. [3]

▶

3 • WHEN HOME IS NOT ENOUGH

1,000 more

long-stay nursing home beds needed every year to 2040, says the ESRI. In 2025 the total rose by just 38. [3, 4, 5]

When the hospital says your parent can leave

Picture the meeting many families dread. An older parent is well enough to leave hospital, but no longer safe at home without help. Their children have jobs, children of their own and other people to care for. Where does their parent go?

This is an illustrative scenario, not a reported interview.

When there is no home support and no nursing home place, patients who are ready to leave can stay in hospital beds, and the next patient can end up on a trolley.

A growing country

Ireland’s population reached **5,525,600** in April 2026, up 786,000 since 2016. Net migration made up about seven in ten of last year’s growth. Every new resident adds to demand for GPs, beds and, in time, care. [1, 2]

Screening on arrival

There is no routine infectious disease screening for people arriving; it is offered, not required. From 2022 to 2024 there were 10,218 screening attendances, against 45,489 applications for international protection. A 2023 HSE report found about 65,000 people recommended for screening had not yet been offered it. [7, 8, 9]

TB rates are ten times higher among people born abroad, but many cases surface years after arrival. That shows when TB became active, not where it was caught. [10]

The nursing home gap

Nursing home beds registered, end 2025	32,408
Change in 2025	+38
Change, year to June 2026	-116
Occupancy, 2026	94.9%
Long-stay beds needed by 2040	47,590 - 53,270

HIQA counts all registered nursing home beds. The ESRI figure is for long-stay beds only (29,579 in 2022), so the two should not be subtracted. [3, 4, 5]

Closing faster than opening

In the year to June 2026, 448 beds opened in 10 new homes, but 564 were lost to closures and cuts. Homes plan about 605 extra beds over the next two years. [5]

Public homes, running late

The HSE announced seven new public nursing homes, with 530 beds, in 2022. They were due by 2024. By August 2026, two had opened. [6]

OUR DEMAND

Publish a plan for every region: home support hours, recovery beds and extra nursing home places, with progress reported each year.

HELP REPORT THE NEXT EDITION

Writers • photographers • researchers • local correspondents • editors

Waited on a trolley, or struggled to find home support or a nursing home place? Tell us. We verify every account and ask permission before publishing.

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SOURCES & READING

[1] CSO: Population and Migration Estimates, April 2026 · [2] Department of Health: Key Trends, Demographics, Tables 1.2 and 1.4 · [3] ESRI: older people’s care projections, 30 June 2025 · [4] Irish Examiner: HIQA Annual Report 2025 · [5] BDO / Nursing Homes Ireland: Member Survey, June 2026 · [6] Irish Examiner, 11 August 2026 · [7] HSE: PQ 1550/25 · [8] AIDA: Ireland 2023; Dáil reply, 13 February 2025 · [9] HSE: BBV/TB Advisory Group report, 2023 · [10] HPSC: TB trends 2016–2025

2030 and 2040 figures are projections. Screening attendances count visits, not people, in five of six regions; the applicant figure excludes arrivals from Ukraine. Bed changes to June 2026 come from a survey of Nursing Homes Ireland members.

PUBLICATION NOTE Original sources are linked on each page. Corrections: Ruan O’Camlaoich cambling@proton.me.