

The Future of Cardiovascular Health In Ireland – *A Manifesto For Change*



Introduction

ABOUT CROÍ

Established in 1985, Croí is a registered Heart and Stroke Charity based in Ireland. Croí's mission is to prevent heart disease and stroke, save lives, empower and support families, communities and future generations to take control of their health and well-being.

This Manifesto has been developed by Croí following the publication last year of a national position paper on the case for Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) prevention in Ireland by the National Institute for Prevention and Cardiovascular Health. Croí also undertook extensive cross community consultation with a number of leading civil society organisations, professional bodies, voluntary and community groups and those with lived experience of heart disease and stroke. The consensus amongst key stakeholders was that at present, our health system is falling short of providing the adequate levels of CVD care. This manifesto seeks to address these current short fallings and lay a pathway to a successful national CVD prevention-based strategy that will reduce the rate of CVD deaths in Ireland each year and reduce the burden that the disease puts on our healthcare system each year.

Burden and impact of Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) in Ireland

Heart Disease and Stroke (CVD) are the biggest annual cause of death and disability globally, accounting for 1 in 5 of all premature deaths (in people under the age of 65). In Ireland, one in two families are impacted by heart disease whether through premature death, disability or living with long term chronic ill health. **Each year in Ireland, more than 9,000 people lose their lives to CVD**, and thousands more are living with its life-changing consequences. While death rates from CVD have declined over time, CVD is the biggest contributor to chronic disease and this burden is what is crippling our healthcare system. **40% of all hospital admissions are due to chronic disease** and **75% of hospital bed days are due to chronic disease**. Yet an estimated **80% of premature heart attacks and strokes are preventable**, meaning that greater prioritisation of CVD prevention and management could save thousands of lives each year as well as ease the growing pressure on Ireland's already strained healthcare system.

We have to act now to reduce the burden of CVD events, hospitalisations and deaths. The population of Ireland was among the youngest of the European Union (EU) Member States for decades, but it is now ageing faster than many other countries, owing in part to increasing life expectancy. While this is a testament to healthier lifestyles and advances in healthcare, population ageing introduces new challenges, such as driving a higher prevalence of chronic diseases. As the population continues to age, the burden of CVD will only increase unless we see significant reforms in our approach to CVD care – specifically, a greater focus on prevention supported by investment in prevention strategies. Government action is needed to improve care for the whole CVD population (those at high risk and those with established disease) so that unnecessary hospital admissions and deaths can be avoided. This is critically important for people living with existing conditions who are at the highest risk, such as those who have already had a heart attack or stroke and are at risk of a repeat event.

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Currently, almost two thirds of people over 65 in Ireland are living with multiple chronic conditions. People living with CVD frequently have additional chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, or kidney disease which puts them at a greater risk of adverse outcomes and making their care needs more complex.

Ireland has no National Strategy to tackle the burden of CVD

Ireland launched a Cardiovascular Health Strategy in 2010, introduced by then Minister for Health, Mary Harney, and it expired in 2019. Its aim was to provide an integrated and quality-assured policy framework for the prevention, detection, and treatment of cardiovascular disease, including stroke and peripheral arterial disease.

Since 2019, we are operating in a vacuum in the absence of any strategic plan. Several of the policy recommendations of the previous strategy remain unaddressed. The failure by consecutive governments to implement these policy proposals, to monitor or evaluate the implementation of the strategy, or to commence updating a policy position that addresses the need for a nationally coordinated cardiovascular health plan, has led to continued calls from multiple stakeholders to develop and implement a new strategy. Ireland now lags significantly behind other European countries in terms of a national plan to tackle the burden of heart disease and stroke.

While recognising that there are several ongoing programmes in place that go some way to managing CVD in Ireland such as the Integrated Care Programme for the Prevention and Management of Chronic Disease (ICPCD), the Model of Care for Integrated Cardiac Rehabilitation, the National Clinical Programme for Stroke, and the overarching principles of Sláintecare – the lack of a unified coherent national strategy with a major focus on preventive healthcare is an enormous unmet healthcare need and leaves us with an unacceptable burden which impacts hugely at an individual, family, and societal level.

While there have been significant achievements in improving emergency and hyperacute care for cardiovascular events in recent years, the focus on acute care is not sustainable. To reduce the rates of CVD related events in Ireland, and align with our international and European counterparts, we need to transition from our current model of reactive care to a more holistic, proactive approach, focused on prevention. This change in approach needs to be understood as an investment and not viewed as a cost. International health economics modelling supports this proposition.

CVD is imposing a heavy and growing burden on our people, our health services and our economy. Greater prioritisation of CVD and preventive action across the disease continuum is urgently needed to slow or halt disease progression and ultimately save thousands of lives.

Ireland (rightly) has a statutory authority, with Ministerial responsibility for Workplace Safety; Water Safety and one for Road Safety. CVD is the cause of over 9,000 deaths every year (80% of which are premature and avoidable). Yet – there is no national plan, no national mortality or burden reduction targets, no defined budget for prevention and no designated individual or agency with responsibility or accountability – all of which is in sharp contrast to Cancer for example, or Road Safety, where the Authority's 5th Strategic Plan (2022-2030) aims for a 50% reduction in mortality and has a Vision Zero target by 2050.

We need to take Action Now

Croí, the Heart and Stroke Charity, works to prevent heart disease and stroke, save lives, empower and support families, communities and future generations to take control of their health and well-being.

In 2024 Croí undertook extensive cross community consultation with a number of leading civil society organisations, professional bodies, voluntary and community groups and patient advocates to develop a manifesto focused solely on heart and stroke health.

The manifesto - The Future of Cardiovascular Health In Ireland – A Manifesto For Change – calls on national policy makers to implement the following five key asks:

- 1** We need a National Plan to promote Cardiovascular Health and reduce the burden of Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) with a major focus on Prevention. This national strategy needs to be in place by 2025 with review and evaluation taking place every five years.
- 2** We need to set clear, measurable, goals, supported by investment in Cardiovascular Health with a clear accountability framework.
- 3** We need a ring-fenced, multi-annual, budget for preventive cardiovascular healthcare.
- 4** We need clear ownership and accountability – to this end, we are seeking the appointment of a designated Policy Lead in the Department of Health with clear accountability to the Minister for Health.
- 5** We need an independent statutory multi-stakeholder CVD Prevention Implementation Taskforce.

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1. Need for a National Cardiovascular Health Plan

From a policy perspective, the ever-growing burden of CVD requires unprecedented action if our health system is to cope. The current focus on acute care is not sustainable as it is based on short-term management of acute events through hospital care, with an under-resourcing of preventive care initiatives. Evidence shows that a reorientation of the Irish healthcare system to prioritise CVD prevention could save thousands of lives a year as well as avoiding considerable costs to society.

The national strategy needs to prioritise early detection, early diagnosis and early access to treatment and rehabilitation. This requires greater investment in screening and early detection across the life-course, especially for Hypertension, Atrial Fibrillation, Heart Valve Disease and high Cholesterol. In the context of high cholesterol, it is imperative that Ireland introduces a national screening programme for Familial Hypercholesterolemia (FH).

2. Need for Clear Measurable Goals and Accountability

A National CVD Plan must be underpinned by clear, measurable, goals, and dedicated investment. These goals must have clear implementation and evaluation timelines, with clear ownership and reporting responsibilities. A high level of accountability is critical to ensuring the plan's success.

This prevention-centred plan will require a more strategic and long-term approach than the current reactionary/treatment-based care model that is in place. Regular reporting with transparency and accountability to the independent implementation taskforce is essential (see more below).

3. Need for a Ringfenced Multi-Annual Preventive Cardiovascular Healthcare Budget

CVD is imposing a heavy and growing burden on our people, our health services and our economy.

A dedicated budget within the Department of Health's annual budget must be allocated, with provision for a multi-year ringfenced budget to enable effective implementation of this National Plan. The investment required will be significant to ensure that the necessary elements to support a preventive-based healthcare care system are in place. However, this investment will deliver long-term benefit by significantly reducing the burden currently facing our health system. It is critical therefore that budget committed to its implementation is done so over a multi-year period, to ensure the necessary follow through to deliver results is achieved.

4. Need for Ownership and Accountability

Ownership and accountability for the National CVD Strategy is essential. A designated policy lead in the Department of Health needs to be responsible for the implementation of the strategy with direct reporting responsibility to the Minister for Health.

5. Need for Independent Statutory Multi-stakeholder Prevention Implementation Taskforce

Given that an unprecedented response to the growing burden of CVD is required, the establishment of a statutory, multi-stakeholder, CVD prevention implementation taskforce is necessary. This body should work closely in an advisory and accountability monitoring capacity with the policy lead in the Department of Health and key personnel in the HSE. The Taskforce must be enabled to provide their strategic input to the national plan which reflects their lived experiences.

They must also be given the authority to hold the Department of Health and the HSE accountable through regular implementation progress updates.

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LIST OF THE ORGANISATIONS WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MANIFESTO

- Active Retirement Ireland
- AkiDwA
- Amgen
- ASTI
- Bristol Myers Squibb
- Care-Connect
- Croí
- Edwards Lifesciences
- EPA
- Galway City Partnership
- Galway Traveller Movement
- Global Heart Hub
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Irish Farm Families (IFA)
- Irish Pharmacist Union

- Irish Rural Link
- Maynooth University (USI representative)
- National Women's Council
- NIPC
- Novartis
- Pavee Point
- Galway City Council
- Sport Ireland
- Údarás na Gaeltachta
- University of Galway
- Volunteer Galway

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