

**An Taoiseach Mr. Leo Varadkar,
Department of the Taoiseach,
Government Buildings,
Merrion Street Upper,
D02 R583**

13th March, 2020.

Re: Covid 19 and adults at risk of abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Dear Mr. Varadkar,

At a recent meeting of the Board of Safeguarding Ireland, which took place on 10th March, the Board suggested that I write to you in the context of difficulties that may arise as a result of the concerns in relation to the outbreak of Covid 19. The concerns have been heightened somewhat in the last couple of days as Ireland moves from a containment to a delayed phase in its efforts to combat the spread of the virus.

Safeguarding Ireland is an independent agency, the main object of which is to promote safeguarding of adults who may be vulnerable, protect them from all forms of abuse by persons, organisations and institutions and develop a national plan for promoting their welfare.

Safeguarding Ireland is particularly concerned for the well-being of those adults who may be most at risk of abuse, exploitation and/or neglect due to the current necessary arrangements in place in relation to curtailing the spread of the Covid 19 virus. The vulnerabilities of adults at risk of abuse are heightened during this particular time in terms of people being able to access services, concerns for people's health and well-being and language used in some of the discourse around Covid 19. There are a number of issues of concern at the present time and the following gives a sense of some of the issues that may require a government lead.

- We would urge the government to take a lead in terms of the language used in the social discourse on the threat and responses to it posed by Covid 19. Safeguarding Ireland is aware of recent references to “bed blockers” and such statements only serve to further isolate and stigmatise those who are most vulnerable. There have also been suggestions that perhaps a younger person would receive priority of service over a person who is categorized as an older person. While it is appreciated difficult choices may have to be made in these very exceptional circumstances, it is important that each person is treated with dignity and respect and that a person who is vulnerable, old or frail has the same entitlements to services as all others.

- In the current prevailing environment, some more vulnerable adults may have difficulty in paying, for example, utility bills or rental fees. There may be a real concern among those people of disconnection of utilities or threats, real or perceived, to their current accommodation arrangements due to the difficulties that are currently being experienced. Safeguarding Ireland would suggest that the government would direct the relevant individuals and agencies to take a flexible approach, on a temporary basis, to the payment of bills and fees while this crisis continues.
- It is apparent at this time that there will be increased pressure on the country's health services. However, it is very important that people, particularly those most in need or at risk of abuse or neglect, are not forced into long term residential accommodation as expediency considerations override peoples' wills and preferences. While short term healthcare needs and available facilities, skills and expertise might dictate the type of services that can be offered in the short term, it is critical that long term arrangements aren't put in place inappropriately. It is important also that healthcare staff realise that, if a person has functional capacity to make decisions about their place of care or preferences in terms of their living arrangements, no other person has a legal right to make those decisions on their behalf. It is also crucial that people can access health care on the basis of their needs rather than on the basis of their age, socio economic status or perceived potential contribution to society. We would suggest that there be positive discrimination in terms of the provision of health care to those who are most vulnerable.
- There is a huge divergence of risk in many families between very young children and older adults, particularly those 65 years of age. This divergence of risk must be recognized by government and by those who deliver services with people in the older age groups being at greater risk and, therefore, probably at greater need in terms of services.
- Safeguarding Ireland is aware of helpful arrangements that have been put in place by the likes of An Post to facilitate access to payments under Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. However, with such flexible arrangements comes opportunities for unscrupulous people to take advantage and control over vulnerable people's finances. There should be heightened awareness among all staff of government departments on the possible increase in opportunities for abuse of people's finances at this time.

Finally, the current crisis situation highlights the need for a body such as a National Safeguarding Authority to promote and protect the rights of the most vulnerable in society. It is a concern that there is no single authority promoting the rights of vulnerable people and it is something that perhaps the government would consider as a matter of urgency.

May I extend my thoughts and best wishes, on behalf of Safeguarding Ireland, to you, your colleagues and the Health Advisors over the coming days and weeks and thank you for the leadership to date in dealing with this crisis.

If you have any queries, please contact me.

Yours Sincerely,



Patricia Rickard Clarke,
Chair.

CC: Mr. Simon Coveney, Minister for Foreign Affairs.
Mr. Paschal Donohoe, Minister for Finance.
Mr. Simon Harris, Minister for Health.
Ms. Heather Humphries, Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.
Dr. Tony Holohan, Chief Medical Officer.