

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs

Opening Statement by Minister Katherine Zappone

Wednesday 5 October 2016

Introduction

I am very pleased to meet the Committee this morning to deal with issues relating to the Estimates for my Department and my plans for the future in the context of the Programme for Government. I welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee on the key issues from my perspective.

Before that may I once again extend an invitation to the Committee to visit Oberstown Children Detention Campus. I know you will have had the opportunity to have an exchange with the Chairperson and Director of Oberstown. I hope you agree that despite recent challenges we are on the right path. I am happy to return to this later if you wish.

As part of this exchange with you today I would welcome the view of members of the Committee as to your priorities in terms of spending on children and young people. This discussion should be a two-way process, and it would be helpful for me to understand what issues you wish to advance. Clearly, with a limited budget, choices have to be made.

Mid-Year Expenditure

The 2016 provision for my Department's Vote totals €1.117bn. This is made up of €1.088bn in current funding and €29m in capital. The composition of the DCYA Vote largely echoes the priority areas which we will be discussing today. The largest portion of the allocation (€679m) relates to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The next largest allocation (€344m) relates to ECCE and the other early years schemes. The Vote also contains

smaller, but no less important, allocations that support a variety of programmes and services that include the youth sector, the Irish Youth Justice Service, research, the young person's policy framework, the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation, the Ombudsman for Children's office and the Adoption Authority or Ireland.

The mid-year expenditure position for the Vote shows an overall variation of €8.410m ahead of profile. This over-profile position is largely attributable to timing issues, particularly in relation to Tusla. It made a significant drawdown of some €24m in the last days of June which was profiled for July expenditure.

At midyear the Tusla subhead was showing an expenditure outlay of €4m below profile. As of end September Tusla is showing an underspend of €1m. The overall Tusla spend is currently largely on profile and I would expect that the full resource provision will be expended by the end of the year. Any marginal overspend which might occur will be met from within the Vote.

The other areas of the Vote were, and continue to, show expenditure variations to varying degrees, including some under-profile figures on the child care schemes. Overall, however, I expect that the year-end position will see capacity within the Vote to meet any marginal overspend arising with no requirement for any supplementary estimate in 2016.

Priorities for the Future

The expenditure details that I have just outlined set the context for my priorities in the future. Since this Government took office on 6 May, we have been working on a challenging and ambitious agenda of development and reform. I have had an opportunity to visit many services throughout the country, both statutory and non-statutory, and I am struck by the commitment, energy and indeed passion of all involved.

I am proud of the part that I played in negotiating the Programme for Partnership Government because of the nature and extent of its commitments about children, young

people and families. In all, there are some 32 specific commitments in the Programme relating to my Department and I want to make swift progress in as many of them as I possibly can, as early as I can.

The commitments will also inform my Department's Statement of Strategy for the period 2016-2019, which we are working on at present, and hope to finalise by the end of this month. As a framework for the specific commitments, my overall strategic objectives will be about:

- having the right policies, legislation and resources in place to meet the particular needs of children, young people and families
- making sure we have the right systems of support for all groups, whether they are vulnerable children in need of intervention by Tusla, child care supports for families throughout the country, or wider supports for children and families generally;
- supporting children and young people in active learning and participation in society;
- looking at policies across government through the lens of children and young people and working effectively across Government to promote their well-being,
- addressing inequalities robustly; and
- critically evaluating our performance, and taking decisions informed by the best available evidence and research.

These are my overall strategic objectives, which then translate into a number of tangible priority actions that I want to advance.

Child Care Supports

One of the biggest contributions we can make as a society to families is to provide high-quality *affordable child care*. We made some progress recently but I want to do a lot

more. I am pleased that the ECCE scheme was extended by an average of 23 extra weeks under Budget 2016. This improvement came into effect from 1 September, with additional entry points in January and April next.

In 2017 my major proposal is for a Single Affordable Childcare Scheme. This will combine a number of existing schemes and, more importantly, extend the numbers of children and families eligible for subsidised childcare over time. My intention, is to introduce some form of subsidisation of childcare costs for 9 to 36-month-old children who are looked after by registered childcare providers. This is a key element of the Budget negotiations at present.

Of critical concern to me is that we promote and support a constantly developing culture of quality in the sector, to add to what we have achieved in recent times. I recognise the commitment of those working in the sector and want to do all I can to address quality, sustainability and working conditions. Of course, we are not the employers in the sector, and cannot set pay rates, but I am very conscious of the issues that professionals face and I believe that it is possible over time to take positive steps to help address their concerns. Unless we do this we will not have a sustainable childcare system.

I am particularly pleased with the work we have done, in close collaboration with all involved, to put in place the new *Access and Inclusion Model*. From the feedback I have received I believe the new AIM model is having a positive impact and will continue to make a real difference. I am delighted that the Model was introduced on schedule and that take-up of various elements is increasing.

Unallocated cases

At my request, Tusla has maintained its emphasis on implementing a three-year plan to eliminate the list of unallocated cases and to ensure it does not recur. This is the second year of the action plan, and I can assure the Committee that it is a high priority for me in

Budgetary negotiations for next year. Unallocated cases have fallen by 50% since the establishment of Tusla in 2014, and there has been a fall of 25% in such cases since the end of 2015. We need to keep the momentum in order to eliminate the list of cases.

Another key element of the reform programme is the development of a modern ICT system to support social workers. The National Child Care Information System will ensure that every social work department can record the case history of every child, who is the subject of a child protection or welfare concern. This will apply from the point of initial referral to case closure. The system will also have the capacity to facilitate the integration and sharing of information on child protection and welfare cases between Tusla areas. The continued roll out of the system is a necessity.

Inequality

A lifelong concern of mine has been the inequality faced by many groups in society. I have committed to a set of important actions in the area of *child homelessness* as part of the Government's Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness.

Of course the overall solution is to prevent families from becoming homeless in the first place, and to restore them as quickly as possible to their own accommodation when homelessness arises. But there are a number of practical steps we can take to support those in emergency accommodation, including access to early years services, school completion services and free public transport for school journeys.

I will continue to work with my colleagues in Government to ensure that we deliver a joined-up set of supports to those who are homeless, and to use pragmatic solutions.

Staying with the theme of inequality, another key concern of mine is addressing *child poverty*. As with homelessness, this is a personal and very human issue which we must combat. The key to this is to work together, through public, private, community and voluntary sectors. We must work with young people, parents and front-line agencies. It is

not just about income supports - even though these play a vital role. It's about providing services such as childcare. We need to prepare children for school so that they have an equal chance at the opportunities that education provides. I believe that education is key to lifting children out of poverty in the long term.

Among the initiatives I want to continue supporting will be the ABC programme, which I will also seek to support in the coming Budget.

Adoption legislation

I am strongly committed to advancing our legislation on adoption. The *Adoption (Amendment) Bill 2015* has passed second stage in the Dáil and I look forward to working with you all when we reach Committee stage, which has been set for 2 November.

I am pleased to say that the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill is now at a very advanced stage of development, and I hope to bring it to Government for approval to publish later this month.

Children First Act

The last Dáil enacted a very important piece of child protection legislation - that of the Children First Act 2015. We have commenced implementation of some provisions, and I will shortly announce a plan for the phased and structured implementation of all of the remaining sections.

Youth Policy

Since becoming Minister I have visited a number of youth services and projects, and met many young people in the context of a range of initiatives that they have been involved in. I have been hugely impressed by the enthusiasm of our young people, and by their confident attitude to what they - and we as a society - can achieve. In particular I have

enjoyed my discussions with young people on participation in decision-making about issues affecting them.

I have put forward the case during the Budgetary process to achieve a favourable increase in funding for youth organisations. In addition my Department is working on the development of the promised *LGBT Youth Strategy* that will encompass education, youth services, mental health and other issues of priority to young people. Also, a Lead Team is in place in my Department to implement our first ever *National Youth Strategy*. So while the Youth sector may attract less commentary than other areas, it is a key focus for the coming year.

Conclusion

I know we all want to build better lives for our children and young people. I hope what I have outlined today will go some way towards achieving that.

As I said at the outset I would very much like to hear details of your own priorities and suggestions about how we can, together, make this a better country for children and young people.