

JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

MEETING 20TH JUNE 2018 - OPENING REMARKS

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CHIEF EXECUTIVE, TUSLA - CHILD AND FAMILY AGENCY

Members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to provide you with my response to the publication of the HIQA Investigation Report into management of allegations child sexual abuse against adults of concern published on 19th June 2018. The information set out here is in addition to the briefing provided to Members of the Committee on Tusla's programme of reform at your meeting of 9th May 2018.

I am joined here today by Mr. Jim Gibson, Chief Operations Officer, Mr. Cormac Quinlan, Director of Transformation and Policy, Ms. Patricia Finlay, Service Director, and Ms. Aisling Gillen, Service Director.

As set out in the report, the issue giving rise to this investigation relates to Tusla's handling of issues in respect of Sergeant Maurice McCabe and I would like to again, reiterate my apology to Sergeant McCabe and his family. I have been very open and clear about the fact that mistakes were made in this case and whilst we must wait for the final outcome of the Disclosures Tribunal I can confirm that we have reviewed the case at local level and have put a service improvement plan in place. Furthermore, staff are being, and will be, held to account as appropriate. Improvements in the area will be supported by the National Childcare Information System (NCCIS), information about which was provided to members on 9th May 2018.

I would like to take a few moments to set out some key points:-

Tusla's Strategic Direction

I welcome HIQA's recognition that there is now a clear strategic direction for Tusla and a long term vision of what we want to achieve. Our core mission is the wellbeing of children and families and we welcome any scrutiny and evaluation that drives improvement. I also welcome HIQA's recommendations in this regard and particularly the collaborative approach being recommended through an oversight group.

I want to reassure members of the committee and the public that HIQA have found and consistently stated that where a concern about a child is referred to Tusla and we have information to indicate that a child is at immediate risk or in a grave situation, that child gets an immediate protective response to keep them safe.

HIQA also confirmed in this investigation and other HIQA inspection reports a consistent finding across service areas of staff advocating strongly for the children and families they work with; that the majority of Tusla staff have shown a capacity to maintain good relationships with families and continue to support these families for as long as is necessary in order to improve outcomes for children and that children's rights are generally well promoted across the service and views of children and their families were sought and respected. So we know that the quality of the service provided to children and families is of a high standard and child-centred.

Of course prioritisation needs to take place as we can't possibly respond to all 53,000 referrals at one time, that's one referral every 10 minutes, and the cases we deal with range from a report of a teenager stealing pizzas, to a social worker visiting a family home where the bathrooms are unclean, there is no food in the fridge, no bed clothes on the child's bed and empty alcohol bottles outside the door, to the most grave situations.

Concerns Raised by HIQA

It was reassuring for me to note that the investigation report highlights exactly those issues faced by the Agency of which we were already aware, which we take very seriously, and which we are proactively addressing, and have been over the last four years, through our comprehensive organisational and cultural programme of reform, information about which was also provided to members of the committee at our meeting on 9th May 2018. This reform programme will improve services offered to children and families and the recommendations of the report are an endorsement of this.

Progress to Date

Members of the Committee will be aware of the significant progress made to date since Tusla was established in a time of financial austerity on the back of 29 inquiries with over 500 recommendations bringing together 4000 staff in over 400 locations. Based on this, I think it is fair to say that we have achieved a lot in a very short period of time, bearing in mind that investment in the Agency only really started two and a half years ago. Key achievements include:-

- The roll out of a national computerised childcare information system (NCCIS) across the country which means that for the first time in the history of the state, all 17 areas are on one integrated IT system, eliminating inconsistencies that previously occurred with a mixture of paper-based systems and a plethora of obsolete and outdated computer systems. I can confirm

that the NCCIS will be live and fully operational across the entire country by 9th July 2018. There is some commentary in the inspection report regarding the capability of NCCIS to capture data in respect of retrospective allegations. However, it is important to note that the NCCIS is an IT system developed to capture information in respect of children referred to Tusla and was not designed for the purpose of recording retrospective allegations of abuse where there is no known or identified child at risk. Of course where an identified child is at risk the system captures this data but it cannot currently capture information in respect of unknown/unidentified children. We are continuing with a body of work in relation to the current system and once this is completed we will look to develop the system to include retrospective cases.

- The development of inter-agency protocols to assist working with key partners and the monitoring of these arrangements at local level, e.g., with An Garda Síochána and the HSE and the report highlights interagency and collaborative working as a consistent strength of Tusla with many examples of children being safe as a result.
- The development and expansion of early intervention work through the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support programme which supports families in their local communities with initiatives such as parenting 24/7 and Meitheal.

Inconsistencies

It is important to note that the report does not indicate that delays or inconsistencies affected the immediate safety of any child. However, I accept that there are some inconsistencies in the system in our response to referrals where a child is not identified as being at an immediate risk and we are actively addressing this through our national approach to practice which will bring consistency throughout the country so that children and families receive a timely and proportionate response. This new national approach to practice, Signs of Safety, information about which was presented to members of the committee at our meeting on 9th May, will also provide robust lines of supervision, governance and accountability.

I am certainly not complacent about the challenges we face, and I acknowledge that there are still variations in how cases where children are not at an immediate risk are prioritised, and we are actively addressing this through our new national approach to practice which will bring consistency across the country.

Governance and Accountability

I accept that we need to further improve governance and accountability and we are progressing work in this area through our programme of reform and will continue to do so. Accountability is about accepting responsibility when there is a problem, identifying the causes, and putting in place

actions to remedy those. There are many layers of accountability in the child protection and welfare system from both external statutory agencies and internally through

- Local oversight groups;
- Signs of Safety;
- NCCIS;
- Child Protection and Welfare Strategy.

It is very important to us as a public body that we are accountable in our work and accountability is built into various processes within the agency. We also welcome feedback on our practice, we learn from mistakes when we make them and we seek to continuously improve our practice and our services and to transfer learning from such feedback. As an agency we are accountable and staff are held to account in a proportionate way and, when required, through robust HR procedures.

The Legislative Context

Members of the committee will be aware of the need for new legislation in the area of retrospective allegations of abuse and that we are currently working on the basis of case law which has placed a responsibility on Tusla to manage allegations of abuse without the legislative framework to support our work in this complex area. Our priority in these instances is to identify any current risk to a child. In order to safeguard children we share relevant information with relevant persons so that those protective adults can make better decisions about the degree of contact their children have with that person. Our child protection social workers, through their training, are focused on the protection of children and have not traditionally been skilled, or trained to deal with forensic type interviews of persons against whom allegations are made. It is only recently we are developing that specialist skill set. It is important for members of the committee to note that in the last two years we have reduced the number of unallocated retrospective cases by approximately 60%, a significant reduction by any industry standard.

Conclusion

The pace of change for Tusla has been significant but I would like to take this opportunity to again reassure, members of the committee and families around the country that we accept the recommendations that HIQA has set out as an endorsement of our programme of reform. And whilst we have some way to go, we are actively addressing all of the issues and have been for some time, so that practice across the country is consistent, and that ultimately children and families receive a timely, proportionate and appropriate response.

Fred McBride
Chief Executive

20th June 2018