



An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlaigh  
Child and Family Agency

## **OPENING STATEMENT**

### **JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS**

**Pat Smyth**  
**Interim Chief Executive**

**13<sup>TH</sup> February 2019**

**TUSLA SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE  
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS  
SOCIAL WORK RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

**1 INTRODUCTION**

I would like to thank members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee for the opportunity to present on Tusla recruitment and retention issues in respect of Social Workers. I will also update the Committee on the issues associated with recruitment in other areas and how these impact on helping to resolve the recruitment challenge faced by Tusla. In addition I will point out some of the initiatives Tusla has undertaken to retain staff. Additional information in respect key statistics and data is set out for members of the Committee at Appendix I.

Since its establishment in 2014, Tusla has taken a number of significant steps to ensure that it is best placed to recruit and retain social work staff. However, despite recruiting in excess of 800 posts since 2014, this has only resulted in a 4% increase in overall Social Work staffing. The reasons for this are complex and relate to both the supply of Social Workers as well as the challenge of retaining staff in the area of Child Protection and Welfare.

When we look at international comparators of Social Workers to children, the number of Child Protection Social Workers per 1000 children in Ireland is half that of the closest comparison, which is England, implying that an additional 1500 Social Workers would be required if staffed at these international levels.

Currently, in Ireland, we train 215 Social Workers through the four Universities of UCD, Trinity College Dublin, UCC and NUIG. In 2018, Tusla recruited 140 new Social Workers which is 65% of this graduate cohort. We compete with the HSE who require a comparable number annually as well as the voluntary sector for these Social Workers.

This underlines the challenge that Ireland is not educating sufficient Social Workers to meet service demands for the coming years.

In addition, Tusla has invested in strategies to retain staff who are recruited to the organisation. However, while the numbers leaving the Agency are falling somewhat, the challenge of the work involved in Child Protection and Welfare means that graduate Social Workers are attracted to other Social Work services, having completed a number of years in Child Protection and Welfare.

The solution to the recruitment of Social Workers and other key staff is one that will take a number of years to resolve and it will require support from the Universities, Educational Institutions, and CORU as well as requiring political support.

Some immediate options being progressed by the Agency include:

- Discussions through DCYA with Universities to increase the number of undergraduate

places available.

- Training and development of our own staff in the *Signs of Safety* national practice model to ensure staff are sufficiently supported and trained for the very challenging work that is Child Protection and Welfare.
- The development of a strategy to create Multi-Disciplinary Teams who will work alongside Social Workers to create additional capacity within current resources to manage the delivery of services at the frontline.

## **2 ESTABLISHMENT**

Tusla was established in 2014 bringing together staff based in more than 400 locations; dealing with in excess of 43,000 Child Protection and Welfare referrals each year. In respect of child protection services the Agency inherited 17 different area systems including 5 which were solely paper based. The Agency relied on a Memorandum of Understanding with the HSE for a range of critical services, including Human Resources. Soon after establishment it became apparent that Tusla's recruitment requirements could not successfully be met through the MoU as both agencies were seeking the same limited staff. When greater financial resources became available in 2016 Tusla developed its own recruitment service at this point.

## **3 RANGE OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY TUSLA**

Whilst the focus of this paper is on Social Work activity, recruitment and retention must be understood in the context of the full range of services provided by Tusla as follows: Child Protection and Welfare, Fostering and Young People in Care, Residential, Aftercare, Adoption, Separated Children Seeking Asylum, Therapy services, Homelessness, Educational Support Services, Family Support, Domestic Violence, Alternative Care Regulation, Alternative Educational Assessment and Registration, Early Years' Service Regulation, Children First Register of Non-Compliance. These services are supported by other directorates including HR, Finance, ICT, Quality Assurance, Transformation and Policy, Corporate Services and Legal Services. Many of these services require experienced Social Workers who previously have worked in child protection and this is an inevitable draw on experienced Child Protection Social Workers.

## **4 HUMAN RESOURCES CONTEXT**

Tusla, when established, had a whole time equivalent (WTE) staffing of 3453 (1396 Social Work) now increased by 440 (of which 56 are Social Work) to reach 3893 WTE (1453 are Social Work) at December 2018. In addition, at the end of 2018 it employed 499 staff through agency providers of which 226 are Social Workers and a further 160 are Social Care staff.

## **5 KEY ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE ESTABLISHMENT**

The following are some of the key achievements of the Agency since establishment and these are set out in greater detail at Appendix II.

- The Safety of Children – it has been a consistent finding of HIQA that where a child is at immediate risk there is an immediate protective response by Tusla to keep that child safe.
- Tusla Recruit
- Central Vetting
- Child Protection and Welfare Strategy

*“No social worker has ever asked me what I most enjoyed about spending time with my children. When social workers were involved before, it was all about what we were doing to harm our children, not what I enjoyed doing with them. This is a different approach, more positive ...” (Parent feedback)*

- Child Protection Notification System (CPNS)
- Prevention Partnership and Family Support

### **NUIG Evaluative Conclusion:**

*“Our strong conclusion is that the organisational culture of Tusla is changing such that it is becoming more preventative in focus and inclusive of parents and children.*

- NCCIS
- Tusla Programme Management Office
- ICT Strategy and the Mobile Workforce

## **6 Complexity of Child Protection Social Work**

In Tusla the majority of social workers are employed in child protection and welfare in addition to children in care work. Our goal is always to try and make lives better for children. In social work cases we are intervening in complex situations where sometimes parents and children are experiencing severe difficulties that have developed overtime and require complex solutions. In addition, we are also constantly balancing the need to intervene effectively into private family life to protect children, but also not to over intervene and damage the autonomy and rights that parents have to private life, nor to unnecessarily remove children where other alternatives to their safety might exist.

We need to move from a culture of blame to a culture of shared responsibility, with the creation of a learning environment for staff, and civic discussion involving children and

families that appreciates the complexity of child protection work. In public discussion social work decisions are criticised for being overly interventionist, while in other situations for not taking action quickly enough or not intervening enough in families' lives.

## 7 Factors which Influence Social Workers Leaving Child Protection

Through international research and also Tusla's own consultation process undertaken as part of the development of the Child Protection and Welfare Strategy, we know the factors which influence a Social Workers decision to leave child protection and they are as complex as the area of work itself including issues like a culture of blame where oftentimes the positive work is ignored with a focus instead on the "bad" stories. Such focus can and does lead to a risk-averse culture which in turn gives rise to professional decision making being pushed upwards resulting in micro-management and low job satisfaction. Furthermore, Social Workers, and in particular those in the area of Child Protection and Welfare, report higher levels of stress and burnout. This can be compounded by overly bureaucratic systems which reduce the amount of time a Social Worker spends on direct work again reducing job motivation. Finally, whilst the role of inspections is acknowledged, and inspection reports, by their nature, will focus on areas of deficit, the absence of commentary on the positive work in an area can result in increased workloads and decreased consistency and in areas of high levels of criticism staff will leave.

## 8 HOW TUSLA IS ADDRESSING RETENTION

Tusla has used intelligence in relation to the factors influencing a Social Worker's decision to stay or leave, to inform the initiatives it has undertaken to address the issues of both recruitment and retention. This has shown a small reduction in Social Worker turnover from 8.69% in 2016 to 7.79% in 2018. These initiatives include the following:

- The establishment of **Tusla Recruit** ensured that recruitment campaigns can be generic and rolling or bespoke, in order to address the specific service needs of the Agency at corporate, national, regional and local level. In this regard Tusla Recruit manages 98% of Tusla's recruitment campaigns.
- Through our **Workforce Learning and Development Programme** we have enhanced training opportunities, supporting continuous professional development, which is provided to Social Workers including leadership training, supervision as well as organisation-wide training in *Signs of Safety*. This is providing a method of work which is relationship and strengths-based which creates better outcomes for children and has been widely welcomed and adopted by staff.
- Through our **Graduate Programme**, we have proactively reached out to all students across Ireland, Northern Ireland, Edinburgh and Aberdeen by creating a sustainable relationship with all Universities, and promoting Tusla as the employer of choice for

graduates.

- As part of Tusla's Workforce Plan, we are also undertaking significant work in the area of developing **Multi-Disciplinary Teams** which is leading to a shift away from a primary focus on child protection to an equal focus on prevention. This work aligns with other strategies eg PFFS, and the new national approach to practice, Signs of Safety. This approach also allows us to capitalise on other disciplines, eg. family support workers, case managers and specialist administrative posts, in order to support the frontline Social Worker by safeguarding their time for direct work with children and families requiring a child protection and welfare service.
- Tusla developed an online toolkit resource for Social Workers, ***Empowering Practitioners in Practice Initiative (EPPI)*** which covers the major themes encountered by them in their daily work. The toolkit sets out clear coaching and mentoring arrangements for Social Workers who engage in the EPPI programme.
- We have developed a range of **Family Friendly Policies** including term time, career breaks and parental leave to encourage staff to stay with the Agency.
- We have also been proactive at addressing issues of stress and burnout by providing enhanced **Employee Health & Wellbeing Programmes** and access to a **Critical Incident Stress Management** programme.

## 9 CHALLENGES

There are many challenges to recruiting and retaining social workers as follows:

- Demand for social workers is not being met by the supply of graduates from the Universities
- Tusla is competing with other sectors for the same cohort of graduates
- Mobility, choice and demographic profile of graduates who often leave within 2 years
- Child protection work is seen as the most challenging within the sector
- Some of the retention initiatives give rise to recruitment demands eg. promotional opportunities and career progression require back-filling, and family friendly policies place additional demands on the teams
- The demographic (age and gender) profile of Tusla Social Workers means there is a large cohort on maternity leave at any given time (currently 92) which require backfilling by Agency staff.
- Delays can occur in the registration of new Social Workers due to the requirements of the registration process.
- Limited access to overseas social workers due to restrictions on visas/work permits for non-EEA Candidate Pool.

## **10 INITIATIVES REQUIRING FURTHER DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT**

The following are some of the broader initiatives requiring further development which are not, or only partially, within the control of Tusla which require further development at a cross-sectoral or governmental level:

- Access to training pathways for Social Care Workers who wish to work and train as Social Workers.
- Additional graduate Social Work Training Places must be made available to meet demands across all sectors.
- A revised pay structure or salary banding which recognises the particular challenges encountered by Social Workers within Child Protection should be explored in order for Tusla to attract more graduates to this area of work.
- Tusla requires on-going strengthening of the legislative framework within which it operates, with a particular need in respect of Section 3 of the Child Care Act 1991 as it applies to the management of retrospective allegations of abuse.
- Communicating and improving a civic understanding and the need for shared responsibility for the care of children in society.

## **11 CONCLUSION**

The Tusla story is still a positive one and we have made significant progress and undertaken much reform since establishment despite the challenges faced by the Agency. As demonstrated above, where those challenges fall within the control of Tusla we have been pro-active and creative in addressing them and we will continue with greater clarity in the context of the workforce plan. However, continued support is required from the wider civic, political, regulatory and media arena to ensure we can meet the significant challenges ahead. In particular I would ask members of the committee to support Tusla in the following areas:

- Additional graduate Social Work places in third level institutions
- Alternative educational pathways for Social Care Workers to work and train as Social Workers
- Revised remuneration structure for Social Workers working in the field of Child Protection and Welfare which recognises the specific complexity and challenging nature of the work.
- Departmental support and funding for technical administrative roles to support frontline Social Workers.

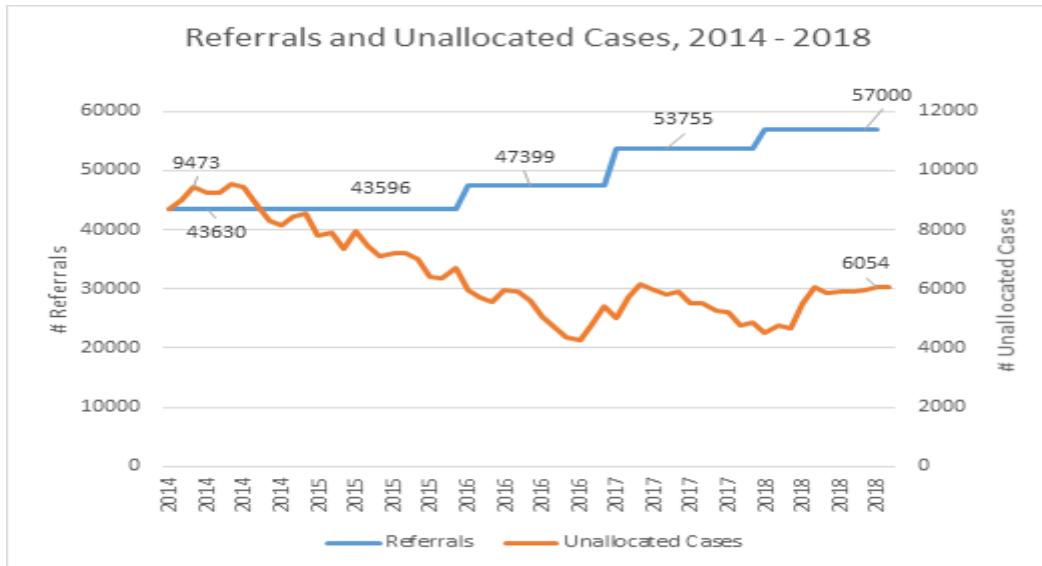
**PAT SMYTH**

**INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**February 2019**

## APPENDIX I

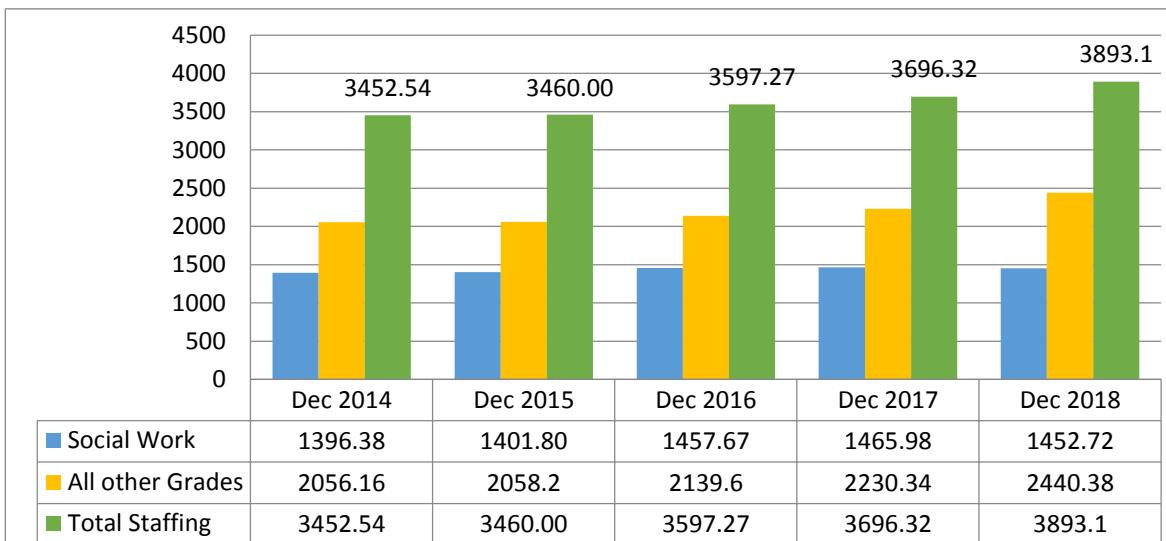
### KEY DATA AND STATISTICS



**Figure 1: Referrals and Unallocated Cases 2014-2018**

PROFILE OF NEW STARTERS –V- LEAVERS/RETIREES			
	2018	2017	2016
New Starters	142	180	214
Leavers	124	138	144
Retirees	34	23	28
Net Change	-16	+19	42

**Figure 2: Profile of New Starters –v- Leavers/Retirees**



**Figure 3: Total WTE By Year**

<b>The number of employees by Role / Grade</b>	<b>2018 WTE</b>
Social Work	1,453
Social Care	1,150
Psychology and Counselling	29
Other Support Staff Inc. catering	53
Other Health Professionals	117
Family Support	132
Education and Welfare Officer	97
Admin Grade 3 to 7	683
Management Grade 8 and above	179
<b>Total Child and Family Agency employees</b>	<b>3,893</b>

**Figure 4: Total WTE by Role / Grade**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of registered social workers</b>	<b>Rate per 1,000 general population</b>
Northern Ireland	5,912	3.3
Scotland	10,913	2.1
Wales	6,333	2.1
England	88,749	1.3
Ireland	4,452	0.9

**Figure 5: Nos. of SW by General Population**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Rate per 1,000 child population</b>
Wales	Social work services for children and young people	4.9
Northern Ireland	Child and family care social workers	4.4
Scotland	Social workers in fieldwork services for children	2.6
England	Children and family social workers	2.4
Ireland	Child protection and welfare social worker	1.2

**Figure 6: Nos. of SW Per 1000 Child Population**

## **Other Key Data**

- The number of referrals to Tusla has increased by 31% since 2014 from 43,630 to 57,000 in 2018. During this time the number of unallocated cases has reduced by 36% from 9,473 to 6,054 (*Appendix I, Fig. 1*)
- Tusla needs to recruit 130 additional Social Workers each year in order to maintain current levels due to retirements and leavers (*Appendix I, Fig. 2*)
- Staffing levels increased since 2014 from 3453 to 3893 in 2018 with Social Work numbers increasing from 1396 to 1453 (+4%) during the same period.
- Comparison with the UK shows that the number of Social Workers per 1000 of the child population is half that of England and one third of that in Northern Ireland. If Ireland increased its Social Work complement to that of England it would require an additional 1500 Social Workers.
- The staff turnover rate for Tusla for all staff is 5.07% and for Social Workers is 7.79%. The comparative staff turnover rate for the UK is 15%.

## APPENDIX II

### TUSLA KEY ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE ESTABLISHMENT

- The Safety of Children – it has been a consistent finding of HIQA that where a child is at immediate risk there is an immediate protective response by Tusla to keep that child safe.
- Tusla Recruit – manages 98% of Tusla's recruitment campaigns and has reduced recruitment times significantly since July 2018 when it took over the Social Work recruitment panels from the National Recruitment Service.
- Central Vetting – 15,828 vetting applications completed since establishment in February 2017 and vetting times reduced from 6-12 weeks to under 2 weeks.
- Child Protection and Welfare Strategy – This is Tusla's strategic change programme to provide an appropriate, proportionate and timely response to children at risk and implement a new national approach to practice called *Signs of Safety*.

*"No social worker has ever asked me what I most enjoyed about spending time with my children. When social workers were involved before, it was all about what we were doing to harm our children, not what I enjoyed doing with them. This is a different approach, more positive ..." (Parent feedback on SofS)*

- Child Protection Notification System (CPNS) - established in 2015 as a secure record with 24 hour access to An Garda Síochána and specific medical personnel.
- Prevention Partnership and Family Support – 17,189 referrals received in the first six months of 2018. The PPFS programme was independently evaluated by NUIG who found evidence of improved outcomes for families, particularly mothers and enhanced social work practice.

#### NUIG Evaluative Conclusion:

*"Our strong conclusion is that the organisational culture of Tusla is changing such that it is becoming more preventative in focus and inclusive of parents and children."*

- NCCIS – The national rollout of NCCIS was completed in 2018 which means for the first time in the State all 17 Child Protection Areas are on a single integrated IT system and this is already improving the responsiveness of Child Protection Social Workers. It is intended to further develop this in 2019 to have automated case notes reducing administrative work for Social Workers whilst improving record accuracy.
- Other Key Achievements – include developments in Educational Support Services, the establishment of the Programme Management Office and progress on Tusla's ICT strategy to support a mobile workforce.

