

Your Ref: JCCYA-i-417

19th March 2019

Aileen Fallon
Clerk to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs
Leinster House

Dear Ms Fallon,

The Irish Association of Social Workers very much welcome the opportunity to speak with the Committee on the issues pertaining to the recruitment and retention of Social Workers in Tusla.

I have been an officer on the Board of the IASW for almost three years and was elected as Chair in May 2018. I will attend the Committee with Joe McCarthy, who has served for many years on our Board, and is currently an ordinary member. We are both registered Social Workers with many years of practice experience.

I enclose our submission on this topic, and we will make an oral presentation (5 minutes) on 27th March 2019 and answer any questions committee members might have. We have made some recommendations from our members feedback and experience.

If you have any questions regarding this submission prior to the 27th March you can contact me through our Office Manager, Danielle McGoldrick.

Yours sincerely,

Áine McGuirk
Chair

Presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs 27th March 2019

1. Introduction

1.1 Chairman, Deputies and Senators, we are delighted to appear before your committee today, and hope that the IASW can be of assistance to you in your deliberations on the issue of recruitment and retention in Tusla.

1.2 Social Workers employed in the area of Child Protection and Welfare practice their skills in a high-risk environment, where there are no perfect solutions, and where their efforts are rarely recognised or acknowledged. The nature of social work is dealing with risk, making the best professional judgement they can when they assess a child's situation to be "good enough" for them to close the door and move on to the next child's story. These are incredible professionals and we must consider how we can promote a positive view of the work they do for children and families in crisis.

1.3 Social Workers bring a range of skills to their work as they help clients negotiate the difficult and complex systems of Irish society in the 21st Century. Families never complain when they have been waiting for a while for Tusla to come and complete an assessment of a child welfare concern. These are largely silent, involuntary clients in a very imperfect world and the social worker's skill is in facilitating the family/child to achieve good outcomes often against impossible odds.

1.4 Social Workers need to be properly supported to do this difficult work and to be acknowledged by society rather than being constantly blamed. Social Workers championed the development of child protection services. It was Social Workers who began to respond to child abuse in the 1970's beginning the process for a slow uncovering of a difficult and shameful past over the next decades.

1.5 The profession needs to attract the best to take on this work. It needs to be carried out to the highest standards. Social Workers need to be bright, well educated, resilient, enthusiastic professionals with a drive for social justice and ethical practice. Consider if **you** would encourage your child to pursue this career and if not why?

2. The IASW

2.1 By way of background, the Irish Association of Social Workers is the National professional body for qualified Social Workers. It was founded in 1971 by a group of very committed social workers and its offices have been located in St Andrews Resource Centre on Pearse Street for many years now.

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2.2 I qualified as a Social Worker in 1978, completing significant other education in this field over the years. I have worked in various sectors including 18 years in Children and Families and 16 years in Disabilities. I appear here in my capacity as Chairman of the Board of the IASW. My colleague Joe McCarthy appears as a member of the IASW and is a retired Principal Social Worker from the Children and Families sector, with a wealth of experience.

2.3 The IASW currently has a membership of 1,300 social workers. We are an active member of the International Federation of Social Workers, which represents professional social work associations from over 55 different countries. Our Vice Chair, John Brennan, is elected to the European arm of the Federation and contributes to international policy and activity. And my colleague today Joe McCarthy served for the maximum term on our Board and remains a member.

2.4 Improving the standards and quality of social work, representing the views of social workers and providing support to social workers describes the main activities of the association. We have ongoing CPD activities provided at reduced cost to members but available to all social workers. We provide a comprehensive Fitness to Practice insurance as part of membership that our members also find invaluable.

2.5 The association is a registered company. It is run by a voluntary Board of Directors that is elected annually by the membership. The Board is supported by the activities of Council representing the main areas of social work activity in Ireland (children and families, mental health, probation, primary care, disability, hospitals, migrants, etc.). We have an active Journal Committee producing a peer reviewed journal for members, a Research Advisory Committee and an International Committee that brought the World Conference on Social Work to Dublin's RDS last year. We actively collaborate with our counterparts in The British Association of Social Work regarding best practice, developments in social work education, professional issues for social work across jurisdictions, and most recently the potential impact of Brexit on social work and those that receive services.

3. Staffing and funding

3.1 The IASW employs two staff. Danielle McGoldrick is our Office Manager and Company Secretary. Sylvia Ryan is our CPD Officer. The Office Manager post is funded entirely through members' contributions and we have a grant from the HSE to run our very successful CPD Office.

3.2 All other activities of the Association are carried out by members in their own time and this poses a serious challenge for the Association as members are finding it increasingly difficult to find that time and energy. The Association and the profession would benefit greatly from the services of a National Director but currently we are unable to fund this.

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4. Recruitment, graduating numbers and employers of social workers

4.1 The work of Tusla is affected by shortages of staff, lack of experienced staff, complex and demanding caseloads, ever increasing regulation, and greater public scrutiny. While regulation and public scrutiny are necessary and welcomed by Social Workers it is unfortunate that this usually brings negative feedback, increased workload on already pressurised staff, lowers morale and perhaps discourages students from this career path.

4.2 By the time a Social Worker is fully qualified they will have invested a significant amount of personal resources (time and money) in reaching that goal.

4.3 Tusla, the HSE and the Probation Service are the largest employers of Social Workers in Ireland. There are approximately 4,500 social workers registered with CORU and allowed to use this title. A good number are employed in the voluntary sector funded by HSE Section 38 and 39 grants. There are agencies in the private sector that employ social workers such as private fostering services, residential services and private hospitals, reflecting an increasing privatisation of elements of care and there are a few independent practitioners mainly working as Guardian's Ad Litem and professional supervisors.

4.4 Working conditions for social workers vary. Some have modern bright well-appointed offices, with admin support and other resources while many do not. In many cases the tools to complete the job to a high standard are lacking. For example, while there is a new National Child care Information System in place social workers must keep that system up to date with little admin help.

5. Recruitment and retention in Tusla

5.1 In the IASW we have been concerned about the recruitment and retention issues in Tusla for some time. We meet with Jim Gibson, Chief Operations Officer and Collette Walshe, HR Director. Our discussions are very useful, but issues persist with regard to recruitment and retention across the country. We are open to additional meetings and support fully the work of the agency.

5.2 We see no evidence of a national recruitment campaign and potential candidates must go to the Tusla Website to see if there are vacancies. The IASW advertise jobs for many agencies. Tusla have never used this facility.

5.3 While recruitment is certainly a significant issue leading to an overuse of expensive agency staff and presents as a significant issue nationally, retention may in fact be the more significant problem.

5.4 Just qualified staff are quickly dealing with complex child welfare and protection cases, complicated legal proceedings, and making life changing decisions for children and families.

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While fully qualified and supervised these are still junior staff and all new professionals need time to develop their skills on the job, with the guidance of more experienced colleagues, supervisors and managers. Without this they are more likely to make mistakes, become stressed and burnt out and take a career break or leave as quickly as they can. In 1978 a wonderful woman in a rural town looked at me, the 21-year-old just qualified social worker from Dublin, standing the other side of her door, and said “sure what would you know”, and she was right. Today’s graduates are dealing with more extensive and complex societal issues with significantly greater statutory obligations and responsibilities.

5.5 To support staff we must also retain in post Team Leaders and Principal Social Workers who provide essential leadership in the provision of front-line services to children and families.

5.6 While all social work has stresses Children and Families is recognised as the most difficult work. These social workers exercise a statutory role including the taking of proceedings under the Child Care Act 1991 and ensure the operation of state regulations with regard to children in care. The provision of care to children and families is complex with high demands from the law, the court and its agents. The Social Worker appears as applicant in the court for Tusla. Here, their professional actions and opinion are subjected to the highest scrutiny in a different way to other professionals who appear in the case as either agents of the court or professional witnesses. This can be extremely difficult and stressful for inexperienced social workers who are just doing their best to provide a professional service to the child who is the subject of the proceedings.

5.7 The work of Tusla comes under the scrutiny of HIQA who spoke to your committee last month on this issue. The Child and Families sector is now the most regulated, inspected and audited area of social work. While regulation is necessary and useful in ensuring compliance with agreed standards, this scrutiny is grounds for further stresses placing an emphasis on paperwork as evidence of work done rather than on the practice of social work. The regulator is not present during actual social worker client interactions and therefore they can only evaluate the written evidence of those pieces of practice. Indeed, the preparation for a regulator visit requires many hours of office work getting files and records sorted out in a way that will meet standards, perhaps taking valuable time from work with the client. The release of reports into the public domain many months later when staff have worked hard to address concerns raised causes renewed attention from media and rains further blows on perhaps already demoralised staff.

6. Deprivation, marginalisation and anomie

6.1 In 2019 social problems are more complex and acute than ever and are more plentiful and concentrated in large urban centres. Abuse, ill-treatment and neglect are found across all communities and these situations are characterised by secrecy,

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emotional isolation, neediness, stress and lack of respect, often hidden under a cloak of normalcy. Social workers become very skilled in working with this kind of family, but they require time and guidance to develop such competencies.

6.2 Tusla's Social Workers work with the most dysfunctional and marginalised families investigating child welfare concerns. There are different complexities in urban and rural areas and child abuse is found in all parts of society. Despite economic growth, better access to education, and good employment levels, social deprivation remains. Addiction, poor educational outcomes, abuse, unemployment, mental and physical health problems, intellectual disability, homelessness and injustice are the backdrop to the day to day work of a social worker. For example, Dublin city has been ravaged by generations of addiction issues since the flooding of the inner city with heroin in the 1980s. Social workers are dealing with many of the same families over several generations and breaking the cycle of deprivation can be very difficult. Today drugs are available country wide, with its attendant social problems, deprivation and marginalisation. If you walk up Merchants Quay, Dublin or see a wet dirty sleeping bag filled with a sleeper in a doorway you may well be looking at the face of a parent of a child in care, or perhaps an adult that was raised in state care.

6.3 Tusla social workers deal with people in their homes and communities, not just in clinical settings where there are rules and responsibilities around engagement. Some communities have become very hostile places with higher risks associated with home visiting. Violence as a solution has become more commonplace, and guns and other weaponry the tools of the drug dealer. Tusla Social workers deal with families in all these environments including areas that other services sometimes refuse to enter.

6.4 Today in some social work offices there is security at the door, restricted entry to their buildings, and meeting rooms monitored by CCTV camera to alert security to any danger. As a result, the social worker draws on all their professional knowledge and training to deal with these families in an empathetic, supportive and helpful way. I am increasingly struck by the capacity of these young professionals to build relationships with individuals and families in this context and give children a chance at a better life either with their parents or in the care of foster or residential carers.

8. Ways forward

8.1 So how can Tusla attract and retain Social Workers to work in this area?

8.2 The shortage of graduates, the level of experience of social workers and the constant movement of staff has a significant effect on services and this is barely acknowledged as a legitimate reason for failing to meet standards in some cases.

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8.3 Tusla now have responsibility for the recruitment of their staff having broken from their relationship with the HSE. Tusla have put in place some initiatives that will help. The development of the Senior Practitioner Post linked to teams will help hold some staff that do not want to progress up the career ladder or to agencies less in the public eye. The introduction of Signs of Safety and the new IT system will also help as these bed-in and prove their worth. But neither can facilitate service improvement without qualified, confident and experienced staff.

8.4 Fresh from college the young graduate may be facing an inevitable future: work for Tusla for a couple of years to get experience and then move on to an agency where work is less high risk, where clients are happy to engage, where hours of attendance are predictable and conducive to a better work life balance, and where public opinion is more positive. Or work for a couple of years to earn enough money to travel and consider the future from far away sunnier climes.

9. Recruitment

9.1 We suggest that they consider the following and how these might help:

- a) Increase the number of places in all colleges offering courses.
- b) Consider how to attract the best applicants to maintain the quality of courses provided, producing graduates capable of commencing work in all areas of social work employment including Children and Families.
- c) Examine where courses in other countries are broadly similar to Irish courses, are likely to satisfy registration criteria and encourage graduates to consider moving here.
- d) Address how to cater for the additional work for social workers who provide practice teaching, as placements are crucial to qualifying competent Social Workers. Can time be protected for this activity?
- e) Streamline recruitment processes so that Social Workers are not sitting on panels waiting for assignment to teams.
- f) Consider the benefits of Temporary contracts directly with Tusla to reduce reliance on costly agency workers.
- g) Consider the benefits of more local recruitment as large national recruitment processes are exceptionally slow in all areas of public service, losing candidates to other agencies while the process grinds on.
- h) Maximise the benefit to the service user at all times and offer workers in temporary posts, including agency workers, the opportunity to remain in their post once appointed permanently.

10. Retention of workers in first years

10.1 It seems that staff who remain for 5 years are more inclined to stay long term. By this time, they will have become experienced in carrying out the work of the agency and will have developed ways to cope with the stress and burn-out associated with this very difficult work.

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Additionally, they may have settled in the area, bought a house, started a family, etc., providing other necessary balances to the decision. However, staff retention may be helped if Tusla:

- a) Commence new graduates with manageable caseloads and effective supervision for a minimum of six months and ideally for the first year of practice.
- b) Address the problem for Team Leaders where they carry unallocated cases leaving them less able to provide the support required by their team and newly qualified workers. Caseload Management systems can only work if there are adequate resources to carry the cases that arise.
- c) Provide skilled admin assistance to ensure quality of file keeping from the outset whether paper or electronic. This is specialised work in the same way that medical or legal secretaries need specific skills with knowledge of the legal and policy framework essential to being effective in their role. (Think of how valuable the experienced hospital nurse is to the newly qualified doctor.)
- d) Provide an effective induction programme so Social Workers feel confident about their role, can access the resources available within the agency to facilitate their work and minimise early mistakes and confidence knocks.
- e) Consider the training aspects specific to Children and Families work and provide on the job training during the first year of practice while the workload is protected. For example, fortnightly training events on different aspects of the job specific to Tusla.

11. Retention of workers longer term

- a) Examine how Team Leaders and Principal Social Workers can better support their teams to carry out the work.
- b) Evaluate the roles of Team Leader and Principal Social Worker so the responsibilities associated with these roles are not eroded by the constant management of unallocated cases.
- c) Consider how we can balance the need for regulation and inspection with the actual professional activities of Social Workers in their daily interactions with children and families. Social work is a qualitative activity and inspection is largely a quantitative exercise.
- d) Examine the experiences of other countries in regard to regulation of child protection and welfare services so we can learn from their experience rather than repeating their mistakes.
- e) Examine the role of administration support that is trained in the legal and ethical framework Tusla are responsible for and how this can be best used to support a quality social work service to the public.
- f) Consider how we can reward those that remain with Tusla. Committed staff will help promote a better service generating a more positive view of the work and the agency.

- g) Consider a range of incentives to encourage staff to remain in this difficult work, such as; (These are just examples)
- family friendly working conditions for parents up to the end of primary school age;
 - work life balance initiatives;
 - a sabbatical as a reward after 5 / 10 / 20 years' service giving staff something to aim for and stay for;
 - early retirement options such as found in other high-risk sectors;
 - additional payment for those that stay in this sector
- h) Tusla must work hard to become an employer of choice where the benefits of staying outweigh the stresses of the work.

We are happy to answer your questions.

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