NAME
Dr Carmel Halton/ chalton@ucc.ie

NAME
Professor Robert Gilligan/ RGILLIGN@tcd.ie

NAME
Professor Michelle Norris/ michelle.norris@ucd.ie

On behalf of the Heads of School of:

School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork
School of Political Sciences and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway
School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin
School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Dublin, Trinity College

Opening Statement

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs

10th April 2019
A chairde,

Thank you for the invitation to address the Committee today on the important topic of the “recruitment and retention of social workers”. We represent the only four third level institutions which are currently accredited to provide professional qualifications in social work in Ireland. These are:

- University College Cork (UCC);
- University College Dublin (UCD);
- Trinity College, University of Dublin (TCD);
- National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG).

We collectively provide two undergraduate degrees (UCC and TCD) and four master degrees in social work (UCC, TCD, UCD, NUIG). These are accredited by CORU (which regulates health and social care professionals). In order to secure accreditation, we have to meet the very rigorous standards CORU requires. These standards are focused on ensuring that professional social work education provides students with the knowledge and competencies required to practise effectively in this intellectually and emotionally demanding profession to ensure the highest standard of care for vulnerable service users. It should be noted that professional education in social work involves academic training in the universities and also carefully planned intensive fieldwork training.

Our opening statement to the Committee focuses primarily on social work education in Ireland and the supply of graduates. We identify and set out proposals for addressing the main barriers to increasing the numbers of places on social work professional education programmes. These are: (1) the availability and organisation of student practice placements and; (2) the funding needs of students. We also examine the international experience of alternative approaches to social work education.

In addition to the recruitment of social workers, we are aware that the Committee also has concerns about retention of social workers particularly in the child protection and welfare services provided by TUSLA, and we do intend to comment briefly on how retention can be improved.

Our collective knowledge of these issues is based on over 80 years of providing social work education courses in Ireland and of working with other social work educators internationally. We have extensive knowledge of the profession and how the recruitment of social workers operates
post-qualification. Based on feedback from our graduates, professionally-qualified social workers, and original research carried out by social work academics, we also have considerable knowledge on the challenges associated with the retention of social workers in child protection and welfare social work.

**Social Work Professional Education and the Supply of Graduates**

Irish universities have been educating social workers for almost a century and social work was the first CORU registered social profession in Ireland. Currently, Irish universities graduate approximately 210 professionally qualified social workers each year. University social work degrees are oversubscribed and there are approximately two applicants for every one place. Irish social workers are highly valued, as reflected in their high employability rates nationally and internationally. While acknowledging the high demand for social work places on programmes, we must also acknowledge the financial burdens that our students experience related to college fees, and travel and subsistence expenses incurred while on placement.

Child protection and welfare social work is viewed as a legally intensive area of social work practice, given the statutory responsibilities associated with the role. Social workers carry significant responsibilities for the welfare and protection of vulnerable children, and they need to be supported by employers. The universities fully appreciate the demands placed on TUSLA in areas of recruitment and retention of social workers. However, it is important to recognise that any changes considered for the education of child protection and welfare social workers will have wider implications for other social work employers and for educational providers. We will discuss these implications later in the document. Consequently, we believe that any proposed changes to current social work education must be very carefully considered.

Research completed by our colleagues into recruitment and retention in child protection and welfare social work demonstrates that long term and sustained change can only be achieved by the introduction of more medium-term, strategic workforce planning initiatives. As university providers of social work education for over nine decades, we would like the Committee to know that we are committed to engaging with all social work employers towards resolving the challenges represented to this Committee. It is worth noting that currently all of the university social work education providers are engaged in consultation with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on developing a strategy for social work placements. We believe that we can form part of the solution to this significant issue. We are absolutely committed to playing our part and engaging with agencies to plan a way forward that will provide a longer-term solution to what we know is an immediate concern. As the established and accredited social work educators in
Ireland, we are open to increasing our intake of students with a view to creating a sustainable supply of new graduates. However, to increase student numbers on programmes a key component of the social work training curriculum needs to be addressed, specifically in the form of a substantial increase in the supply and availability of high-quality student placements.

**Increasing the Number of Agency-Based Student Practice Placements**

1) As university social work educators, we have identified that the key to any expansion of student numbers, and by implication of social work graduates, is an increase in the number of student placements. Social work education involves the placement and assessment of students in real world social work contexts, under the direct supervision of a CORU registered social worker. In order to pass and progress to graduation they must successfully achieve standards of practice that meet with the rigorous criteria and standards of proficiency, as prescribed by CORU. Students are required to undertake at least two extended unpaid work-based placements of 14 weeks in duration in the course of their professional social work training, and are assessed against prescribed professional social work competencies. In order to pass and progress to graduation they must successfully achieve standards of practice that meet with the rigorous criteria and standards of proficiency, as prescribed by CORU. In addition, it is important to note that these placements can incur significant costs to the student, e.g. travel, subsistence, accommodation in other geographical regions where their practice placement is located. Students have to factor in these costs, in addition to high fees, before deciding to undertake a programme of study. Many of these students have no access to public funding in the form of government grants and scholarships, and even those who do qualify are not reimbursed for all costs incurred during their training.

2) Increasing the number of placements, and in turn the number of graduates entering social work, will require employers to address barriers to placement availability. These include: limited office accommodation, lack of structures of support, excessive caseloads, the availability of sufficient numbers of qualified supervisors, and initiatives that respond to the ongoing training and development needs of qualified social workers.

3) The universities recognise there is a need for the development of diverse and creative approaches to student placements, including the development of high-quality long arm supervision\(^1\) across a variety of agencies, the development of practice learning units, and the promotion of lead specialist practice learning teams.

\(^1\) Long arm supervisors are CORU registered social workers employed by universities to provide supervision to social work students on placement in an appropriate organisation where there is no registered social work practitioner.
4) In addition, a commitment is required to embedding social work student practice learning placements in social work employment contracts, as was originally envisioned with the creation of the senior practitioner role in the HSE and TUSLA. Relationships between the universities and social work employers/ placement providers also need to be formalised into memoranda of understanding. These would include protocols for the sharing of sensitive data on student performance, which are necessary to conform with data protection legislation.

Consideration of Diverse Approaches to Social Work Education

University social work educators are committed to exploring new models of social work training that increase the supply of social workers. Discussions are already underway with CORU in relation to exploring possible options which comply with CORU accreditation conditions. Because social workers practice in very demanding health and social care contexts, that require a significant period of education, skills development and professional development, our opinion is that social work education cannot be fast-tracked. Regardless of the model adopted, it must equate to existing training programmes in terms of the time devoted to the professional formation of social workers.

Summary: Social work education in Ireland and the supply of graduates

We recognise that there may be many innovative ways to deliver programmes, which will require forward planning and development by all the parties. University social work educators have previously demonstrated a commitment to developing innovative social work programmes, e.g. UCD modified aspects of its MSW provision to deliver a social work programme for probation officers, UCC established an undergraduate social work degree - BSW for mature students - and TCD and NUIG developed their Masters degrees.

All of the university providers of social work education previously collaborated with the Department of Health who provided resources in the late 1990s that led to the doubling of student numbers on our social work programmes. In addition, social work programmes have been proactive in revising and expanding their academic and practice curricula in response to changing social conditions and service user needs. These developments have equipped newly-qualified social workers to engage more effectively with the social changes faced by service users such as drug misuse, new types of illness, and different forms of poverty and isolation. We have also invested heavily in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for experienced social workers to ensure their skills sets are reflective of best practice nationally and internationally.

Recruitment and retention of social workers in child protection and welfare
We recognise the importance of serving the recruitment needs of TUSLA, as well as other employers of social workers. The focus of this Committee’s work has been on child protection and welfare social work, and while we appreciate that TUSLA is the largest employer of social workers in Ireland, there are other significant employers e.g. the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Probation Service, wider disability services, and the civil society sector. These employers all have an important role to play in responding to the needs of vulnerable service users outside of the child protection and welfare sector. Therefore, in considering our submission document, we would respectfully request that the Committee seeks to avoid any unintended consequences for the wider labour market for social workers and equally for the social work education sector, which has a responsibility to serve all parts of the profession equally. We agree with TUSLA in their submission that Ireland has too few social workers in child protection and welfare compared to other countries, and recognise the impact on staff workloads and employee strain. We are here to assure the Committee of our desire to play our part in resolving this shortage. An important consideration in recruitment of high calibre candidates is the need for public education campaigns, which promote social work career choices aimed both at school leaver and more mature applicants considering a career change.

While increasing the supply of social work graduates is necessary, issues of staff retention cannot be addressed solely by increasing supply. We need to find ways to retain and care for existing child protection and welfare social workers. We know from what social workers on the ground tell us that their decisions to leave child protection and welfare social work are due to the incessant and rapid pace of organisational change, excessive workloads, and insufficient staff supports and supervision. Child protection and welfare social work can be rewarding, stimulating and important work, but it is also acknowledged to be one of the most legally intensive and stressful sectors in health and social services. There is a significant international literature outlining the impact of social work on social workers. To promote retention, social workers who undertake this work require a high level of staff welfare, early career support measures, structured induction programmes, protected caseloads, and professional supervision to mitigate the impact of the work.

**Concluding Points**

As social work educators, we are ready and willing to play our part in increasing the supply of qualified CORU accredited professional social workers. The key constraint, namely the availability of student placements needs to be urgently addressed to facilitate greater student recruitment. In order to progress towards the expansion of student numbers on social work programmes we suggest that the following actions are needed:
- Establish campaigns to promote social work as a career choice;
- Increase the supply of placements in conjunction with TUSLA and other employers;
- Establish a bursary scheme (including fees and placement costs) to attract high calibre candidates on to social work degrees;
- Provide support structures that give due recognition to the particular challenges experienced by child protection and welfare social workers, as mentioned above.

Signed:

Prof. Cathal O’Connell, Head of School, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork.

Dr Carmel Halton Senior Lecturer in Social Work, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork.

Prof. Alastair Christie, Professor of Social Work, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork.

Prof. Jim Campbell, Professor of Social Work, School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin.

Prof. Michelle Norris, Head of School, School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin.

Prof. Robbie Gilligan, Professor of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Prof. Stephanie Holt, Head of School, Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Prof. Caroline McGregor, Director of Social Work, School of Political Science and Sociology, NUI Galway.