Statement to Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on behalf of Fórsa Trade Union, representing Social Workers providing services to Children, Youth and Families

Meeting Tuesday 28th May 2019

Fórsa Trade Union welcomes the opportunity to present to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs in its capacity as the trade union which represents social workers in Ireland’s public sector. The issue which generated this invitation to attend a meeting and to make a written submission is the matter on recruitment and retention of social workers.

In the published Tusla Business Plan 2017 there were 1,472.75 wte social work posts recorded. Of those wte posts 8% were vacant, generating 4,282 cases awaiting social worker allocation, 654 of which were deemed high priority. Based on an accepted norm of a running caseload of 15 cases per social worker, the deficit identified amounts to a minimum of 285 wte social workers. This situation has not improved in the intervening period.

We have sent, as an appendix to this statement, a submission which was made to Fórsa by the Union’s Social Work Professional Committee within Tusla which outlines the views directly held by social workers regarding reasons for difficulty in retention of social workers.

Common themes outlined directly by social workers include;

- Child protection work has become increasingly complex and more demanding, placing increased levels of stress on individual social workers, including the younger cohort of social workers which enters the system, many of whom by that stage do not yet carry high demand family responsibilities.
• As social workers become more experienced, there is a correlation between work demands and increased family pressures. An overarching percentage of social workers are female and find it increasingly difficult to achieve the level of work/life balance to cope with these added pressures.

• In addition, given the percentage of female employees in social work, it is inevitable that there will be large tranches of both maternity and parental leave. This of course is a most welcome condition of employment. However, the problem arises when replacement and backfilling strategies are both cumbersome and unproductive. This is clearly evidenced by the number of unallocated cases previously cited.

• Many young social workers who enter into the workforce are immediately challenged by the demanding nature of child protection social work. Typically these would be college graduates in the early to mid-twenties age range who opt to travel as an example at a time in life when there is better opportunity to so do.

• Unlike nursing or medicine, there is no real requirement to emigrate as far as Australia to gain experience in the area of career development. The proximity of the NHS in the UK affords an opportunity for short term emigration without too much upheaval where experience can be gained in a universally accessible and more attractive health and social care system.

• The career pathway for social workers has not been examined for more than 15 years despite the much changed environment and landscape of child protection in that time. Innovative ways need to be found to provide a gateway for college entrants to choose social work as a profession. On entry into the workforce, this gateway must be developed into a pathway whereby social workers can see the prospect of career progression, as their levels of experience grow. Automatic advancement from basic grade to senior grade social worker, based on protocols and checkpoints, would provide a clear vision of career development at little or no cost to the State, as those levels of posts already exist in the system. In addition, having garnered years of experience, it is not uncommon for a social worker to excel in a particular area of expertise. The State, therefore, would greatly benefit from converting this specialist expertise into a model of advanced practitioner working. To complete the journey
this expertise and experience can be of further benefit if imported into posts which have responsibility for service planning and delivery.

- Due to the cumbersome nature of the recruitment processes a market has been created for the use of agency staff. Therefore, a young social worker can choose to register with an agency and be assigned to work in a particular area. This has potential for a twofold negative on the system in that firstly, the agency social worker is not committed to a durable post and is not tied down to same, and secondly, working conditions are much looser in areas such as pension contributions, etc.

- In Ireland there is an increasing blame culture on the rise. Tusla as an institution has been a headline victim of this culture in recent years. It is not unusual to hear calls to have Tusla disbanded in the wake of a particular child protection controversy. This undoubtedly places a stigma upon the workforce at all levels but most notably upon the social worker who is at the very centre of child protection work.

- By nature a high percentage of child protection and social work issues in society are spread throughout urban areas. The associated costs of living in urban areas, which is reaching crisis point in this country, is restricting the attraction of social work as a career of choice.

- A formalised exit interview system must be used to analyse properly the reasons why such a relatively high percentage of social workers choose to leave Tusla. Additionally, the change management culture in a relatively new organisation like Tusla, can often be driven as a priority reaction to negative media and public comment. It is often non inclusive and creates additional demands on social workers without any sharing of a common vision.

Thank you for this opportunity to make this statement which in addition to the appendix document forwarded can be taken as the written submission from Fórsa on the issue.

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