OPENING STATEMENT

TO

MEMBERS OF THE
JOINT COMMITTEE OF THE OIREACHTAS
ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

Tuesday, 9th July 2019

Mr Jim Gibson
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INTRODUCTION

Chairman, Vice-Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Oireachtas Committee today to discuss issues pertaining to the impact of homelessness on children as part of the preparation of a report by the joint committee.

My opening submission today will cover the following areas:

- Introduction and Context
- Impact of Homelessness
- What Tusla Provides for Families who are Homeless
- Tusla-funded Homeless Services

Introduction and Context
Homeless is a devastating and unacceptable reality for many families in Ireland. As the State Agency established to promote the welfare of children, we urgently see and advocate for the need for a long-term resolution to this crisis and we are committed to supporting children, parents and communities in dealing with the impact of homelessness on their lives.

We see and recognise the courage and resilience of parents and their extended families in supporting their children in the most challenging circumstances and we with our partner agencies wish to support this intent and ensure that these supports are provided at the earliest stage, to avoid the family and children experiencing even more difficulties into the future.

The short and long-term effects of homelessness on children are well documented and evidenced. The effects span from early childhood right through to adolescence and early adulthood. Homeless deprives children of the most basic rights, opportunities, and things than many of us take for granted in our lives.

While the Agency does not have a direct role in the provision of housing or accommodation for homeless families, we provide a range of services from prevention and early intervention through to child welfare and protection. At all times we are seeking to support children and families to live happy and fulfilled lives and where difficulties arise to support them to manage these difficulties so that children are not harmed. This of course can be more challenging when families are homeless, and their ability to maintain connection to the extended family and support networks are diminished. Our goal is to try and maintain the integrity of the family while others seek to assist them in finding longer-term housing. Of course, there are occasions where an immediate risk is identified, and in those situations there is an immediate protective response.

The agency is involved in a wide range of integrated approaches and foras, including:

- Rebuilding Ireland - the National Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness and we are committed to working in collaboration with statutory and voluntary/community partners to achieve full implementation of the action plan.
- Tusla works in partnership with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive to address the family support needs of homeless families. There is a protocol with the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive that provides guidelines for making referrals to Tusla.
- Providing funding to Focus Ireland to deliver a range of services.
- The Homelessness Interagency Group which was established by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government with senior representation from the key State organisations with a role to play in relation to homelessness.
The Dublin Joint Consultative Forum which comprises the Dublin Region Homeless Executive as well as the other statutory and voluntary/community agencies engaged with provision of homeless services.


Children and Young People’s Service Committees (CYPSCs).

Impact of Homelessness
A recent report by the Ombudsman for Children ’No Place Like Home’ (April 2019) provides a very useful insight into the realities and impact on children who have experienced disruption from their extended family and community and their struggles to cope their identity of being homelessness, and the experience of living in temporary accommodation.

The experiences described by the children reinforce our own concerns about the long term emotional effects. Children who are homeless experience disruption in their lives which results in a loss of their established relationships with friends, family and community.

Another essential aspect of children’s development is education. Children who are homeless experience considerable challenges in remaining in education. School attendance and school performance is impacted. Children often arrive at school tired and for many the completion of homework is problematic. Many travel longer distances. The voices of children recorded in the Ombudsman for Children reports records their feelings of shame and embarrassment which impacts on their ability to form relationships in the school place.

What Tusla Provides for Families who are Homeless
Tusla provides a wide range of supports and pathways for families experiencing homelessness. This is done through early intervention and family support work (Prevention, Partnership, and Family Support Programme), Child Protection and Welfare Services, Educational Welfare Services, Children and Young People’s Service Committees, Family Resource Networks, and additional initiatives among others. These programmes and initiatives signpost and provide pathways for families.

Prevention Partnership and Family Support is a national pathway in providing practical, social and emotional responses to children and families, including those who are homeless.

Through PPFS, local area pathways have developed networks of agencies to work collaboratively to provide timely responses to children. A key principle which underlines PPFs is the recognition of human rights and social inclusion.

Local Area Pathways put in place a flexible and creative intervention for children to ensure that presenting concerns can be responded. This pathway is well placed to respond to children who are impacted by homeless as its criteria incorporates children who require additional support without which they would be at risk of not reaching their full potential. Those supports may include health social and/or educational issues.

The development of the Meitheal model within PPFS adopts a holistic approach which allows the services identify a range of responses as needed. A Meitheal plan identifies both strengths and needs and seeks to address practicalities, emotional issues and parental supports where families are experiencing adversity such as homelessness.

Central to this model is the contribution of both children and their parents and community, voluntary and other statutory agencies working together to support families through their challenging experiences.

Tusla has appointed a Homeless Liaison Officer who is a point of contact between the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive /Local Authorities and partner agency homeless services that provides guidance and advice regarding child welfare and child protection concerns. This
officer visits family hubs and private emergency accommodation in respect of Children First compliance. Tusla supports Children First training provided by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive to private and emergency accommodation providers.

Tusla also has a protocol with the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive that provides guidelines on making child welfare and child protection referrals to Tusla. This describes the pathways that includes improving outcomes for children through Prevention, Partnership and Family Support services (PPFS) and/ or through child protection services where required.

In the area of education, Tusla provides guidance for Home School Community Liaison Coordinators when engaging with children and families who are experiencing homelessness. It recommends that children who are experiencing homelessness should be prioritised for accessing universal and targeted supports under the School Completion Programme.

Tusla’s Educational Welfare Service’s response to children and families experiencing homeless is to identify supports that assist the educational welfare of children. These supports include the Home School Liaison Coordinator in Dublin who assists families in accessing Leap Cards to support school attendance.

Home School Liaison Coordinators provide spaces for parents who have children of different starting/finishing school times with warm and comfortable space to wait for their children.

Home School Liaison Coordinator /School Completion Officers/Education Welfare Officers negotiate manageable school arrival and department times for children.

Education and Welfare Officers assist families’ access school places close to their temporary accommodation.

Where referrals are received in respect of absenteeism attributed to homelessness, Education and Welfare Officers work to identify supports that can assist the family get their children back to school.

Tusla has developed a homework initiative in two family hubs. This pilot has been developed in collaboration with Dublin City University.

**Tusla-funded Homeless Services**

I believe the agency’s commitment to improving the lives of children who are homeless is clearly evidence by the continuous funding of NGOs who provide crucial and effective services, including:

- Funding to Focus Ireland of approximately €3.5m annually to provide a wide range of services for children and families experiencing homelessness, or young people being supported in aftercare.
- Tusla provides funding to Anew which provides residential support to women who are homeless and pregnant and supports to exit homelessness.
- Tusla also funds two family child support workers Family Homeless Action Team (HAT).
- Funding to Family Resource Centres, including:
  - **Well View**
    - A family resource centre in Dublin 15 that supports:
      - Families living in local hubs to avail of cooking and laundry facilities as needed;
- Facilitates access to homework spaces and developing social networks with other parents.

  - **Fatima Groups United FRC**
    Provides a quality community based professional childcare service for children and families, including:
    - Providing an early year’s education service for 87 children.
    - Supports parents and families in relation to their child’s needs and development including transition to primary school.
    - Provides services for children with additional needs.

  - **Hill Street FRC**
    Provides Public Health Nurse Baby Clinics as part of delivering effective community based Family Support Services and Initiatives. This includes:
    - Engagement with services.
    - Physical health needs addressed.
    - Co-ordination of health services.

  - **Hill Street FRC**
    Provides an inclusive and culturally sensitive service through the development of a mutually inclusive and multicultural programme for families and children which resulted in:
    - Increased numbers of Homeless families attending Hill Street.
    - Greater awareness amongst staff at to the issues facing Homeless families.
    - Multi-cultural events attendance has grown.

  - **Lus na Greine FRC**
    Hosted an event to mark United Nations Poverty Awareness Day in October
    - This project resulted in wider knowledge and realisation of the impacts of homelessness and its causes.

**Conclusion**

Finally, Tusla recognises the huge challenges and the resilience of parents and children, and the essential need for extended families and naturally occurring network to minimise the impact on children and maintain connections.

We are committed to supporting children and families across all levels of need. We are present in every community, working collaboratively with other organisations to support children, families, and communities.

Thank you.