

**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Disability, Equality &
Integration**

Speech by Minister Roderic O’Gorman, TD re Ministerial Priorities

3 November 2020

I’d like to thank you for this opportunity to address the Committee, and set out my priorities as Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth.

As you’ll be aware, this is a new expanded Department, bringing together elements that had formed part of the previous Department for Children and Youth Affairs, with Equality elements previously under the remit of the Department of Justice.

It will, in time, also encompass disability, which is currently under the Department of Health.

It is a broad remit, and it gives us an opportunity to bring many of Ireland's most pressing social issues into one Department.

A common theme within the strands of the Department is vulnerability, and people who, historically, have been marginalised from the political process.

My hope is to be a voice at the Cabinet table for those groups, and I am sure that this Committee will seek to support those groups through its own work.

Early Years - Covid

I'd like to start by speaking about one of the areas this Department has been most traditionally associated with – childcare.

This last year has been one of significant challenge for the Early Learning and School-Age Childcare Sectors.

The sector, like many others, was closed at short notice in March, and was one of the first to re-open earlier in the summer.

I think that it is important that I pay tribute all those working in the childcare sector. They were among the first to re-open following the lockdown in April and May, and have remained open through the present Level 5 restrictions. It is thanks to the heroic efforts of childcare professionals that this was possible.

Throughout this, my Department and the Government have put in place a range of supports for the sector. Since taking office, the Government has supported early learning and childcare providers through the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, the EWSS.

Early learning and childcare providers were the only sector to receive an automatic inclusion to the EWSS up until 31st March, recognising the vital role played by the sector.

On average, the EWSS was covering 65% of wage costs for service providers. Further enhancements were recently announced to the EWSS, which will now cover, on average, 81% of wage costs.

In total it is expected that the State will have invested €200m extra in the childcare sector in 2020, above and beyond its normal budget. In the first 3 months of 2021 alone, an additional €70m is available through the EWSS.

Early Years – Staff Pay

Given this, I think it is important, too, that I recognise pay and conditions in the childcare sector are not commensurate with the work done. This is most clearly an issue for the staff themselves, but can also impact on the recruitment and retention of staff, and thus the care for children.

The most recent data available, from mid-2019, indicates that the average wage in the sector is €12.55 per hour. That is clearly insufficient given the care, attention, and responsibility that comes with caring for children.

The Programme for Government commits us to support the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee in the sector and the drawing up of an Employment Regulation Order, which would determine minimum rates of pay for early learning and childcare workers, as well as terms and conditions of employment.

I also look forward to working with SIPTU and the newly formed Childhood Services Ireland as they seek to advance a wage agreement on behalf of staff and providers.

I've engaged with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation to address the issue of sick pay for staff in the context of a wider national scheme on sick pay.

In addition to a JLC, my Department is continuing to progress the development of a new Funding Model and a Workforce Development Plan, which may allow for development of new policy tools to support better pay and conditions in the sector in the medium term.

Early Years – Childcare costs

For parents of young children around the country, and for expectant parents, I know that childcare costs are a significant financial burden.

There is consensus on this point, and in moving to address it, we need to look at how this can be done substantively and to the benefit of all parents.

We have the Expert Group on the new Funding Model, which is due to report in 2021, and report that will provide the basis for more work on this. I would like to make clear that all options are on the table, including capping fees.

Early Years – Supporting disadvantage

I am also committed to making childcare as accessible as possible, particularly for people who are disadvantaged.

Department-funded early learning and childcare programmes including ECCE, AIM and NCS are removing barriers to access among children who are at risk of poverty and disadvantage; children for whom English or Irish is not a first language; and children with additional learning needs.

The National Childcare Scheme is designed to be highly inclusive, to meet the needs of the most economically vulnerable children and those living with other forms of disadvantage, particularly with regard to addressing poverty traps that have failed families, sometimes for generations.

Under a sponsor arrangement, highly vulnerable children can access free early learning and care and school age childcare.

In addition, there are a number of initiatives under the Access and Inclusion Model, or AIM, that promote inclusion in pre-school services, with both targeted and universal actions to support access and inclusion in the ECCE programme for children with disabilities.

Building on these existing supports, a key priority of the Expert Group established to develop a new funding model is to identify further supports to improve access among children with additional needs and/or to mitigate the impact of early disadvantage on these children.

Equality

A new, and significant, area with the new Department is that of Equality.

Much of the work within the equality brief is focused through a number of Government strategies dealing with equality and vulnerable communities under my remit.

The strategies include the National Strategy for Women and Girls, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, the Migrant Integration Strategy and the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy.

Collectively, the Strategies support our work towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 10 by reducing inequality.

I intend to follow the work of these strategies closely by chairing the meetings of the committees charged with the monitoring and oversight of the Strategies.

And as some of these Strategies near their conclusion, I will work with stakeholders to examine what has been achieved and develop new approaches to future challenges.

As part of the equality brief, I will also look to advance the Gender Pay Gap Bill, which I hope to bring forward in the coming year so it may be in place by 2022.

Additionally, my Department will examine the possibility of adding socio-economic status as a new grounds of discrimination with the Employment, Equality and Equal Status Acts.

Equality – Disability

One of the most significant areas of transfer is that of disability, from both Health and Justice, bringing disability policy and service delivery together within one Department.

This gives us an opportunity from looking at disability as specifically a health issue, into wider view, encompassing all parts of a persons' life.

One of my core immediate priorities will be to advance implementation of UNCRPD. Our approach to meeting the terms of the Convention is one of progressive realisation.

What this means in effect is that work is continuing apace on the reforms needed for an optimum level of compliance with the Convention's requirements.

As we continue to advance the implementation of the Convention, it is absolutely vital that Government hears the voices of persons with lived experience of disability.

The experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities are paramount in the development of policies and programmes if they are to directly address real needs.

That is why we are establishing a Disability Participation and Consultation Network as a priority as we work towards meeting the terms of the Convention.

My colleague Minister Ann Rabbitte announced the establishment of the Network in August and recently announced the successful applicants for both the organising member and the grant-funded members.

One of the network's first tasks will be to organise consultations for Ireland's first State Report to the UN on our progress in implementing the Convention.

Disability – Transfer of Functions from Health

The transfer of disability from the Department of Health to my Department is a very significant and complex transfer of functions.

It envisages the transfer of responsibility for policy development and for oversight of the provision of health and personal social services for people with a disability, with the associated staff from the Department and a €2 billion budget in the Health Vote

The transfer will have to take account of new governance and funding arrangements to be applied to the HSE. Changes to primary legislation (i.e. the Health Acts) will be required.

Work is ongoing between officials from the Department of Health and my Department. Pending resolution of the issues referred to above, the target date for the transfer is Quarter 1, 2021.

In the interim, the Minister for Health retains statutory responsibility for disability services.

Direct Provision

Another brief that has moved to my Department is that of International Protection accommodation.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to end the current system of Direct Provision within the lifetime of this Government and to replace it with a new international protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach.

The expert Advisory Group on the Provision of Supports, including Accommodation, to Persons in the International Protection Process was brought together last year with Dr Catherine Day as the chair.

Minister McEntee and I jointly presented their report to Government on 20 October and we published the report on 21 October.

The Government agree with the group's conclusion that the current system of Direct Provision is not fit for purpose and must be replaced.

We have already begun work on the White Paper that will set out a new model for accommodating applicants for international protection, and this will be published by the end of 2020.

Change will take time and the process of moving from the current system will be complex. However, it is important that we immediately begin to create a more humane system, rooted in human rights.

We will shortly introduce a formal vulnerability assessment process, and my Department is engaged with HIQA to enable it to undertake independent inspections of current accommodation.

The process of delivering such a comprehensive change to a long-standing system will require the support of residents and civil society as well as Government Departments and agencies.

I hope that we can call on their support to deliver a new model that will have the well-being of residents at its heart.

Child Poverty

One of the early priorities I identified, and I think it is a priority for all Deputies and Senators on this Committee, is combatting child poverty.

As we all recognise, growing up in a marginalised and disadvantaged community, experiencing intergenerational cycles of poverty, educational disadvantage and unemployment, seriously hinders a child or young person's opportunities.

The Programme for Government commits to publish and implement a successor to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. A focus on Child Poverty will be a key component of this strategy.

The programme also commits to implement the current First 5 Strategy for babies, young children and their families which outlines a number of poverty prevention measures.

As I recently outlined in the Dáil, I am committed to establishing a new, ambitious target to reduce child poverty, and this will form a central element of the successor strategy to Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. However, an ambitious target is of little value without the means, structures, and will to meet it.

As part of the successor strategy, I will establish new infrastructure, within my own Department, but also across Government, for the delivery of our child poverty reduction goals.

The new Strategy will contain mid-term targets and monitoring mechanisms, so we are better able to measure progress and address any potential slippage.

My Department, and this Government, is committed to setting and achieving an ambitious target to reduce child poverty, underpinned by the necessary resources and structures.

Youth work

An area that has been key to supporting disadvantaged and marginalised children, is youth work. I have been consistently impressed with the dedication of the youth sector in supporting children and young people, in particular throughout the pandemic.

I have announced an additional €5 million for youth services nationally, as part of Budget 2021, bringing the overall allocation to €70m.

Young people have been severely affected by the restrictions to protect public health during this pandemic.

Their education, their experiences of social and community life and their early career experiences have all been disrupted at a key formative stage.

Early in my tenure, I was able to provide a small grant to support local funded organisations, Youth Information Centres and youth clubs to defray some of the Covid 19 costs.

This has been followed by a similar scheme aimed at improving ICT in youth services this year. I see this funding as supporting the frontline services as they seek to innovate to continue to provide critical services to vulnerable young people.

As well as supporting targeted youth work, which is so fundamental in tackling disadvantage, my Department will also support universal services, so that all young people who wish to participate in youth services have the opportunity to do so.

Tusla

Tusla is the largest specific area of expenditure for my Department. In recent years, a number of demand-led service pressures has led to a significant strain on its resources.

This year, I prioritised resourcing Tusla to fulfil its statutory responsibilities and support the most vulnerable in our society. I increased Tusla's allocation to €878m in 2021. This is an effective increase of €61m, or 7% over the original 2020 allocation of €817m.

This is Tusla's largest ever annual budget increase. It underlines this Government's commitment to assisting Tusla to meet its statutory obligations, protecting and supporting our most vulnerable children, young people and families, in:

- Tackling significant demand-led cost pressures in the provision of children's residential care,

- Increasing staff allocations to front door referrals and safety planning, in order to efficiently reduce unallocated cases,
- Providing care and protection through quality services for victims of domestic, sexual and gender based violence.

This investment will also support Tusla to allow Ireland to meet its international commitments to transfer more unaccompanied children in Greece to Ireland as quickly as possible.

Tusla will also continue to support community and voluntary organisations that deliver services on its behalf, and manage and safeguard records transferred from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

At a time when the impacts of the Covid pandemic are felt most by the most vulnerable in society, I'm proud to be prioritising funding for the vital services that Tusla provides and supports.

Legacy Issues

The legislation to protect the database, created by the Commission of Investigation, of women and children who were in Mother and Baby Homes, has now become law. We are all be aware of the significant, wider issues raised by that debate, regarding how we respond to the legacy of institutional abuse in this country.

As the Government statement of October 28th said, there was a long discussion on these issues at the Cabinet meeting of that day.

In response to the concerns raised, the Cabinet agreed a series of next steps regarding publication of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission Report and access to records, as well as support for survivors of Mother and Baby Homes. My hope is that these measures begin to rebuild the trust damaged over the past two weeks.

The passage of the recent legislation raised much more fundamental questions about how the State responds to historical institutional abuse. There is a need for more openness, for transparency, and for understanding and acknowledgement of the wishes of survivors.

In recognition of this, the Government has announced that it will work to establish on a formal, national basis an archive of records, which will include relevant records and witness testimony by victims and survivors.

I believe this could be a site of openness and truth-telling, in survivors' own words, for Irish people now and for generations to come, to reveal the story and context of institutional abuses in twentieth century Ireland.

I am committed to bringing forward legislation to allow for the exhumation and, in so far as is possible, identification of the remains at the site of the Tuam Mother and Baby Home.

In 2021, I am also committed to introducing legislation to resolve the issues with the current architecture of Adoption Information and Tracing, which were again highlighted by the debate around the Mother and Baby Homes Database Bill.

Each of these three legislative measures will require detailed scrutiny, and I look forward to working with members of this committee in undertaking this, and in ensuring that we are able to consult with a wide range of survivors and experts on each issue.

On Friday (30th), my Department received the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation in the Mother and Baby Homes. The Government is committed to publishing it as soon as possible.

I hope the steps set out above go some way to addressing the concerns raised.

I am determined that, in light of the events of the past few weeks, the State does right by the survivors of Mother and Baby Homes, and their families.

Conclusion

All you will be aware, the Department covers a wide and expansive brief, and it was not possible for me to cover all elements that I would have liked to in my speech.

I do hope, however, that I've given some idea of my priorities over the coming months and years.

Thank you.