

Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and
Integration.

24th November 2020

Opening Statement of Mr. Bernard Gloster

Chief Executive Officer – Child & Family Agency (Tusla)

Introduction:

Deputy Funchion, I want to thank you as Chair and your fellow committee members for the invitation to meet with you today and for prioritising the Child & Family Agency (Tusla) so early on in your agenda and wide-ranging brief.

I am joined today by my colleagues Ms. Kate Duggan National Director of Services and Integration and I want to welcome her to the Agency having joined us in August, Mr. Pat Smyth Director Finance and Mr. Ger Brophy Chief Social Worker.

Information to the Committee:

The clerk to the committee pointed out to me that there are several new members of the Oireachtas in the committee and that it would be helpful to have some general overview information on Tusla and its brief. In this regard I have provided via the clerk a presentation slide deck which I used earlier in the year to brief Oireachtas members on the 2019 Annual Report of the Child & Family Agency. I hope the members who were not at that presentation or are new to

the Houses will find the information helpful. I am happy at any time, as I have done since coming to Tusla in late 2019, to engage with any individual member of the committee or indeed the Oireachtas on any aspect of the work of Tusla.

I am aware there are some specific matters you wish to discuss today, and I will be happy with my colleagues to address those both in this statement and in any questions members might have.

First, I would like to address some of the key issues that have been a feature of Tusla in recent times.

Covid – 19:

Tusla is considered an essential service provider within the meaning of the Government plans for managing the response to Covid-19. In March of this year when it became obvious that ‘normal’ life and activity for all of society would be fundamentally altered, I prioritised and have maintained focus on three essential services.

They are

- Child Protection,
- Children in Care,
- Domestic and Sexual Gender Based Violence.

In the first phase of ‘lockdown’ significant and serious concerns emerged in these three aspects of our work thereby justifying the focus on them. Of concern was the initial significant reduction in referrals to the child protection and

welfare system, restricted ability to visit children at home, challenges in maintaining contact between children in care and their families and an anticipated surge in domestic violence related need.

Significant planning and crisis management on a 24/7 basis was used to mitigate some of the attending risks. To give members some indication of the concern, we saw instances of referrals going from an average of 1,500 per week to 960. Visiting children at home reduced to some 30% of normal activity and while many remote means were used to connect with children and families this was nonetheless a concerning time. I can however assure the committee that those cases requiring priority response and visit did receive them. Contact visits for the majority of 5,900 children in care (access) was in the main replaced with remote technology.

Now that we have reached Level 5, we must remain focused on these priorities, however we are now receiving referrals of 1,300 per week, we are visiting children at home and access visits for children in care are routinely happening. Domestic and sexual Gender Based Violence services continue to report high demand and activity.

Tusla's Education Support Service (TESS) has been working to support children, families and schools to adjust to the new and challenging circumstances as they returned to school. Additionally, our Alternative Education Assessment and Registration service noticed a significant increase in applications for home education in recent months.

I want to pay tribute to our staff, their representative organisations FORSA and INMO, our partner organisations and statutory colleagues for their enormous flexibility and hard work as we continue to provide essential services during the pandemic. I want to pay particular tribute to the Community and Voluntary sector who continue support many children and families for whom the pandemic brings additional vulnerability.

Improving Services & Performance:

Many members of the committee will be familiar with periodic commentary and reports on different aspects of the performance of Tusla across a wide range of services. In the context of an ever-increasing demand the Agency does continue to make improvements, and these are often validated by external sources such as HIQA.

When I joined Tusla in September 2019 I assured the previous committee and the public that I would work to a position whereby Tusla would increasingly identify its own challenges, openly communicate these with the public and take the necessary steps to address those issues.

One recent system wide example of this was in respect of the obligation of Tusla to report suspicion of child abuse to An Garda Siochana. Tusla identified a problem in its Kerry services, however the approach was not as traditionally in responding to this as an isolated incident. Tusla immediately conducted a self- assessment nationwide, identified a 13%

problem in this obligation and put in place the necessary corrective actions and audit to be assured in the future. There was open and responsive engagement with key partners, the public and the media on this problem.

I fundamentally believe Tusla must continue to approach its problems and challenges in this fashion. Serious issues and challenges arise for the Agency, whether that is in compliance with the high bar set in regulations overseen by HIQA, achieving improvement in GDPR which is a particular problem or in consistently providing a timely quality service to all children in our brief.

The single biggest challenge in Tusla is consistency and while progress is and continues to be made on many fronts, we cannot be complacent because we know that the improvements are not everywhere. In this context I expect we will continue to learn of problems and issues for some time to come while we work towards achieving this consistency.

It is for this reason that the reform of the Agency on three fronts is critical (Practice Culture and Structure). I am aware that the Board of the Agency is seriously concerned at the pace of progress in respect of the change of the governance structure which we have decided, and which requires approval outside of the Agency. This change is central to addressing several deficits including performance and accountability. The current structure and organisation of the Agency is to put it simply, not good and while it remains, many problems will continue to occur and will require an

over centralised reactive response. The Board has raised the matters with the Minister who has been very supportive of Tusla in his short time in office and we look forward to an early and positive decision on this critical issue.

Mother and Baby Home Commission – Database:

Members will be aware of the recent attention to the Mother and Baby Home Commission database and the Government's intention for Tusla to be the host organisation for the database pending new legislation to deal with many challenges for many people regarding their information and identity.

I am conscious of the commentary about Tusla during recent weeks. I want to assure the committee that notwithstanding the very complex legal issues that remain to be resolved, the only focus of Tusla regarding adoption information will be to give the maximum support to all people, to treat them with kindness and understanding and to respect not only the rights but the needs of all. The absence of legislation to deal with the provision of information will continue to be a source of great anxiety for people, and the resolution of this issue is beyond the reach of Tusla. We welcome intended legislation to address this.

Specific Matters:

Committee members had some additional specific matters which the clerk brought to my attention and I will briefly address those here and in our subsequent discussion.

(Social Work Recruitment):

Tusla now has for the first full year, a clearly understood pay and numbers framework. This ensures that there are clear targets for recruitment by grade and profession, there is clear certainty as to what the Agency can afford and not, there is a more realistic investment of energy in workforce planning and there is a greater likelihood that new resources can be allocated in an evidenced based approach.

The target workforce for 2020 is 4784 WTE and with 4698 in place at the end of Q3 this is the most stable the Agency has been in respect of almost full employment since its establishment, a significant milestone. I expect in the coming weeks to be able to add to that number following the recent welcome budget decisions of Government.

Of the 4698 in place 1674 are Social Workers which is approximately 100 below the funded target, 1360 are Social Care Workers and the increasing emphasis of any new developments has and will be in front line grades.

I advised the previous committee shortly after taking up post that I was concerned at the dependency on agency staffing which then stood at more than 650 and I undertook to address this matter as a priority. By March this year we had

completed a large-scale conversion of agency staff to Tusla employment and more than 400 took up that offer. Agency usage is now set at a maximum of 250 for the entire organisation and we have in fact consistently operated well below that since March. This has had not only financial benefits to the public purse and benefits to our overall approach to retention but has also contributed to improved continuity of service for the children and families we serve.

Social Work graduates are relatively low in number for the needs of the Country as there are now many employing authorities all seeking Social Workers. 100 graduates this year expressed an interest in working with Tusla and some 70 of these have been hired. Overall, 238 Social Workers started with the Agency this year (nine months) more than the total for the full year of any since 2015. In the same period there have been 130 leavers (including 14 retirees). I have recently met with the new Minister for Higher Education regarding the possibility of increased supply and the Board of the Agency will consider corresponding measures to attract new graduates to this most complex area of work.

I also want to note that in addition to this work being complex I am concerned at the increasing threats and intimidation of individual staff. While this is from a relatively small cohort of people and we enjoy good relationships with so many, the online treatment of some individually identifiable staff is a source of serious concern.

(Foster Care Recruitment):

We are very fortunate in the Irish context to have an alternative care system which is an international leader when it comes to the numbers of children placed with foster carers as distinct from residential care. Over 90% of children in state care are now with foster carers and increasingly we see a strong representation of relatives as foster carers. There is little doubt that recruiting foster carers remains a challenge and the Agency has recently completed its second annual national campaign aimed at raising awareness and encouraging others to consider fostering.

(Making Reports to Tusla):

I am aware of the interest of the committee on the steps after a referral is made to Tusla and information or feedback going to the person making the referral particularly where this is from a school. The Agency receives a very substantial number of referrals from schools (both mandated and welfare) and local staff will work with the school as part of the overall approach to ensuring safety for children. Schools have and use regularly access to local duty teams to discuss approaches to concern in addition to the formal referral being submitted. I am happy with my colleagues to address any more specific questions on that process.

Conclusion:

Chair, the Child and Family Agency has many challenges in one of the most complex areas of personal social service provision. Despite these challenges there is enormous good work of a very high quality carried out every day by our staff in responding to 20,000 open cases, 6,000 children in care, 6,000 children in Education Support, many thousands in receipt of family support and specialised teams upholding regulation in more than 4,000 crèche and pre-school services. There are many other discreet parts to Tusla providing important services.

I am happy to take questions and again thank you for the invitation to attend today.

ENDS