

## **Opening Statement**

**Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**

**Ms. Kate Duggan**

**Chief Executive Officer (Interim)**

**Tusla – Child and Family Agency**

**27<sup>th</sup> June 2023**

***“Challenges facing refugee and migrant children in Ireland”.***

Chair, and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. I am joined here by Clare Murphy, National Director of Services & Integration (Interim), and Lorna Kavanagh, Area Manager, National Services and Integration.

Refugee and migrant children are one of the most vulnerable groups of children in Ireland. Whether in care, accommodated by the State, or settled with their families, they face a broad range of challenges such as housing, health, education, community integration, reunification, and risk of exploitation or trafficking.

Tusla supports children and young people living with their parents in International Protection/Emergency Reception Centres, separated children who are being cared for by adults who are not their legal guardians, and Unaccompanied Minors.

### **Children living with their parents in International Protection/Emergency Reception Centres:**

Tusla, together with our partners in the community and voluntary sector, provide support to these children and families. This includes family support, service signposting, information and advice, access to preschool supports, school placement and afterschool services, resettlement programmes, and needs assessment.

Our Area Managers communicate with centre managers to ensure the centres are clear on referral pathways for Tusla where a child protection concern may arise.

Tusla also provides core operational leadership at national and local level to lead and coordinate the 27 Children & Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC’s).

Tusla and the Children’s Rights Alliance are also jointly commissioning research into identifying integrated family support approaches for families living in the International Protection accommodation system, to inform how we can better support them.

I would like to acknowledge our staff and our partners in the community & voluntary sector, for their agility and hard work in responding to meet the needs of these children and families. However, as the numbers increase, we will be further challenged to respond in a timely and accessible way, within existing resources.

### **Separated Children Seeking International Protection/Unaccompanied Minors:**

Separated Children Seeking International Protection/Unaccompanied Minors are children under 18 years of age who present in Ireland, from their country of origin, who may need international protection and are separated from their parents or their legal/customary care giver.

Many of these young people may have high levels of vulnerability, have experienced significant trauma, and require access to different state services. Some face problems and challenges on issues including separation from family and friends, bereavement, social isolation, language barriers, emotional and mental health problems, discrimination, racism, and uncertainty around their future.

However, this is not a homogenous group of young people. Many of the young people who arrive in Ireland are 16-18 years, in search of accommodation, access to education or employment, and reunification with their families. Each of their needs can be different.

Tusla's Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP) team delivers the service from the point where a child is identified by Department of Justice Immigration Officials as a potential SCSIP/Unaccompanied Minor. Our dedicated team undertakes an assessment which informs care planning, placement allocation, and where eligible, access to Aftercare. Our team also supports these young people with the reunification process, in the absence of a clear mandate to undertake same.

Over the last 12 months, there has been a significant and unprecedented increase in the number presenting to, or being referred to this service, which has significantly impacted our ability to respond appropriately. In response to this, we have scaled up services, increasing the staffing levels and increasing the number of placements. Despite our efforts, we are acutely aware of the increasing pressure on our services, and the impact that this can have on children and young people.

There are several key challenges impacting our ability to respond effectively:

- The unprecedented demand for this service, in a relatively short period of time.
- A shortage of appropriate care placements (in the context of an overall placement crisis).
- The challenges around availability of suitably qualified staff, and the need to expand the authorised worker role supporting these young people.

- The need for legislative changes/policy direction on the provision of care/accommodation to separated children/unaccompanied minors
- The need for a review of the transition to Adult Services and the right to Aftercare Services
- The need for a review of the Reunification Process, setting out clear roles and responsibilities.

As an Agency, our internal audit system has identified significant challenges in standards of governance, documentation, placement, communication, and legal matters for this service. We have a service wide improvement plan in place to address this, however, this remains challenging in the context I have outlined. We highlight these challenges today as this ultimately can have an impact on the young people who use our service.

We have also undertaken many proactive initiatives including:

- Collaboration with child advocacy organisations/NGOs on the development of the revised Tusla Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP) Intake and Eligibility process (including access to advocacy and a review process).
- Partnership with MECPATHS to raise awareness and provide training to staff on child trafficking in Ireland.
- Implementation of the 2021 Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) procedure in partnership with An Garda Síochána
- Developing a bespoke learning and development training programme to train our front-line staff

It is also important to note that many of the young people being accommodated by, or in the care of Tusla have integrated very well, accessing education and employment, engaging in sports and social activities, and many have reunified with their families.

As an Agency, we are determined to do everything we can to ensure that this vulnerable group of children and young people access safe and appropriate services. To do so will require timely and definite legal and policy changes, significant interagency co-operation, and an increase in the resources available to respond to these referrals.

We have engaged with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth and the Children's Rights Alliance to plan an engagement with stakeholders in the wider sector to consult on how we could better structure and deliver services to SCSIP/UAMs. We will also be engaging with young people who access/have accessed our services, to hear directly what their experiences have been, and how they think we can improve services to better meet their needs.