

## **Opening Statement**

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

**Ms. Kate Duggan**

**Chief Executive Officer (Interim)**

**Tusla – Child and Family Agency**

**20th September 2023**

**“Discussion on Child Protection”**

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), Ger Brophy, Chief Social Worker, and Lorna Kavanagh, Area Manager, National Services and Integration.

Since we last appeared in front of this Committee, we have published our Annual Report for 2022, which highlighted the depth and breadth of services provided by the Agency in 2022, and the significant increase in demand for our services, with 82,855 referrals to Child Protection and Welfare Services alone.

There has also been much public discussion in recent months on the subject of child protection, including the Child Law Project Reports, a letter from Judge Dermot Simms to a number of Government departments and bodies, including Tusla, a scoping study on the subject of Child Sexual Exploitation, and discussion around the increase in Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP). While this public discussion and scrutiny is welcome, it does highlight the unprecedented challenges we as an Agency currently face.

In particular, we face an increasing referral rate, an inadequate supply of alternative care placements (emergency, foster care and residential care), an increase in the number of separated children seeking international protection, and workforce supply issues, particularly in Social Work and Social Care. We have also noted an increase in the number of children and young people with more complex needs, who also require access to other specialist services, such as disability, mental health, and addiction services to better meet their needs.

This increase in demand for services must be considered in the context of wider societal issues such as the housing crisis, global movement, poverty, domestic and gender-based violence, drugs, criminality & exploitation.

We appeared in front of this committee recently to discuss Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP). 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. As an Agency, our internal audit system has identified challenges in standards of governance, documentation, placement, communication, and legal matters for this service, and this was also highlighted by a recent HIQA inspection report into the service. In response to these, we have scaled up services, increasing the staffing levels and increasing the number of placements available. We have a service wide improvement plan in place to address this, however, this remains challenging in the context I have outlined. We have also engaged with 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/UAM's and planning for this is now underway.

You may also be aware of the recent publication of the 'Scoping Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People in Ireland' conducted by The Sexual Exploitation Research Programme (SERP). The increased risk of child sexual exploitation of vulnerable children and young people is something we are acutely aware of and remain concerned about, whether relating to children and young people in our care or those in the wider community. Some of the key measures which inform this work within Tusla are the Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Procedure in 2021, in partnership with An Garda Síochána, joint working protocol between Tusla and An Garda Síochána, which forms an integral part of the responses to child abuse and neglect, particularly in relation to child sexual exploitation, and includes regular meetings with An Garda Síochána, and the establishment of an anti-trafficking working group in readiness for the Department of Justice, *'Third National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking of Human Beings'*, which includes the area of child sexual exploitation.

Following the publication of this study, we met with the researchers to discuss the serious child protection and welfare concerns identified in the report. We requested that confirmation is sought from the relevant participants that either Tusla or An Garda Síochána were notified of the identified child protection and welfare concerns highlighted in the report. In any cases where it is not possible to confirm if a notification was made, the researchers will request that the concern is reported, and prove confirmation of this. We are also conducting an internal review of the reporting and process management of concerns regarding child sexual exploitation.

Another area of key focus in the Agency currently is that of Special Emergency Arrangements (SEA's). It is a reality that for a small number of young people, we are challenged to find a suitable or regulated placement, not due to a financial challenge, but due to an inability to provide a more appropriate or long-term placement, often due to the complex needs of the young person.

We know that Ireland is not alone in addressing challenges to the increased demand for placements, particularly for more vulnerable teenagers in care post COVID-19 pandemic and the ever increasing risks associated with such placements have become evident across the globe. We have set up a Crisis Management Team to take immediate action on the ongoing issue of the increase in SEA's, and this is a priority at the highest level within the Agency.

We continue on a daily basis to mitigate the impact of these challenges, and to provide services within the resources available to us. We have a number of Strategic Service Plans (Foster Care, Residential Care & Aftercare) and our People & Change Strategy which have been developed to address these difficulties and constraints, and which are delivering incremental service improvements, but the scale of the challenge remains, and the wider societal issues as outlined earlier are impacting the overall effects of our efforts.

We have also begun a transformational Reform Programme which will play a key part in ensuring that we can continue to provide quality and timely services for the children and families we serve in the future.

I can assure you that we are taking and will continue to take any action we can to improve services for the children and families we serve. We also welcome the highlighting by various external bodies of the hard work of Tusla staff across the country, seeking to provide the best possible level of service within the resources available, and to ensure that the best interests of children and families are at the centre of decision making.