

Meeting of the JOC on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth

Wednesday 20th September 2023

Minister's Opening Statement

Thank you Cathaoirleach and members of the Committee for inviting me here today to discuss matters relating to Child Protection. I would like to begin by acknowledging the great work done by Tusla and the commitment of its staff in the context of a huge increase in demand for its services in recent times.

Referral rates to Tusla continue to increase year on year. This can be considered to be a result of increased awareness of child protection within society and some changes to the reporting processes.

However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that the Agency is facing. Ireland is now accommodating over 90,000 persons fleeing the conflict in Ukraine and International Protection applicants, resulting in significant pressure on State services including Tusla.

This is resulting in challenges in providing sufficient suitable placements for children in care, and I am aware of the concern of members and other stakeholders in this regard, and specifically in relation to 'Special Emergency Arrangements.' The presentations of children entering care are also of increasingly complexity.

In addition to these pressures, Tusla is also experiencing pressures with the recruitment and retention of staff, and this is something my Department is working to address in collaboration with the Agency.

Specifically in relation to foster carers, I know of the valuable role that they play, and recently received the pre-Budget submission from Irish Foster Care Association. I would like to once again state that it is a priority of mine to seek an increase to the foster care allowance in Budget 2024.

I would like to assure the Committee that the safety and welfare of children in care is a priority for myself and my Department, and for Tusla, and we will have an opportunity to discuss this further in the course of our meeting.

Over the last number of months, a number of child protection matters have been the subject of media reports, including the UCD scoping report on child sexual exploitation, HIQA inspection reports of child protection services, which were found to be non-compliant, and the letter from Judge Simms.

I would like to take the opportunity to address each of these in turn.

The Committee will have already received my observations on the very concerning matters raised in the University College Dublin scoping report, 'Protecting Against Predators,' which raises unsettling concerns that young girls in residential care centres might be being targeted by predatory and organised groups of men.

As stated in that correspondence, my Department, and Tusla continue to take the issue of potential child sexual abuse very seriously. I have met a delegation from the UCD Sexual Exploitation Research Programme, including one of the authors of the report, in order to discuss the report and its findings in more detail. My Department has and will continue to liaise closely with Tusla regarding its response to the report.

Regarding the HIQA reports, my officials have been in regular contact with Tusla around the non-compliance with child protection standards arising from HIQA inspection reports and there are action plans in place to address the deficits, and I am happy to elaborate on these during our session. There are also further engagements planned between my Department, Tusla and HIQA regarding the proposed new HIQA National Standards relating to child protection and children in care.

I would like reiterate here this evening that I and my Department continue to place a clear focus on the care needs of separated children in care, be they from Ukraine or other states. Tusla has seen significant increases in the number of children under this heading requiring care over the last 18 months.

These pressures, along with the broader increase in referrals, are resulting in challenges in providing sufficient suitable placements for children in care, and I am aware of the concern of members and other stakeholders in this regard, and specifically in relation to 'Special Emergency Arrangements.' I would like to assure the Committee that the safety and welfare of children in care is a priority for myself and my Department, and for Tusla, and we will have an opportunity to discuss this further in the course of our meeting.

I will conclude by again thanking the Committee for this opportunity to discuss these important issues, and I look forward to a positive and constructive exchange of views.