

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 27 Márta 2019*

*Wednesday, 27 March 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

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### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Lisa Chambers,	Senator Fintan Warfield.
Deputy Denise Mitchell,	
Deputy Tom Neville,	
Deputy Sean Sherlock,	

DEPUTY ALAN FARRELL IN THE CHAIR.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Senators Freeman and Noone.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** We have also received apologies from Deputy Rabbitte.

**Chairman:** Okay. I will note that. I propose that we go into private session to deal with housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

*The joint committee went into private session at 10.05 a.m. and resumed in public session at 10.15 a.m.*

## **Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers: Discussion**

**Chairman:** I welcome members and viewers who may be watching proceedings on Oireachtas television to the public session of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. The purpose of today's meeting is to discuss recruitment and retention of social workers. In the first session the committee will hear from representatives of the Irish Foster Care Association. In the second session the committee will hear from representatives of the Irish Association of Social Workers.

On behalf of the committee I welcome the representatives of the Irish Foster Care Association. Ms Catherine Bond is the chief executive. Ms Sharon O'Donnell is the media and communications officer. Mr. Andrew Murphy is the supports services co-ordinator. You are all welcome and thank you for coming.

In accordance with procedure I am required to draw your attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. However, if you are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and you continue to so do, you are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of your evidence. You are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and you are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, you should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Any submission or opening statement you have made to the committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting. After your presentation there will be a question-and-answer exchange from members of the committee. Ms Bond, please make your opening statement.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** On behalf of the Irish Foster Care Association I thank the committee for the invitation to appear today. I am accompanied by my colleague, Andrew Murphy. Andrew is a project worker with the IFCA national support helpline.

The Irish Foster Care Association is the representative body for foster care in Ireland and

promotes excellence in foster care. IFCA has 2,036 members comprised of foster families, social workers, social care workers, academics and those with an interest in foster care. I have included information about IFCA in Appendix 2 of our submission so I will not dwell on the details further.

Foster care is the backbone of care for children who are in the care of the State in Ireland. Ireland is unique insofar as the majority of children who are in the care of the State grow up experiencing family life. This is testament to the value of the importance of family in our society and is reflected in our legislation. We need to celebrate the fact that the majority of these children are growing up as happy confident young people who attend school every day. Children in foster care are thriving and foster families offer secure happy and fulfilling childhoods to children while supporting them to reach their full potential. A recent report by the Irish Penal Reform Trust found that, in general, children in foster care are not involved in juvenile justice. This is another positive indicator for children who grow up in foster care.

The committee has invited IFCA to appear this morning to talk about the recruitment and retention of social workers in Tusla. The role of the social worker is central to the care system in Ireland and for foster families. The majority of children in the care of the State live with foster carers. At the end of September 2018 there were 6,044 children in care, of whom 92% were placed in foster care. Some 26% of these were with relative foster carers. During the same period, there were 3,287 foster carers on Tusla foster care panels.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has the statutory responsibility to approve foster carers and place children with them. The National Standards for Foster Care document makes provision for Tusla to contract other agencies to provide foster care on its behalf. The national standards document also requires Tusla to ensure that foster care placements are adequately supported and that children in care have an allocated social worker.

The process of becoming a foster carer is rigorous and is governed by Tusla procedures and guidelines for foster care committees. The procedures outline the assessment process of prospective foster carers conducted by social workers. Foster care committees are convened by Tusla and approve foster care applicants. Reports on the review of foster carers, recommendations to remove a foster carer from the fostering panel, the outcomes of investigations of allegations made against foster carers and placement breakdown are also adjudicated at the local foster care committee. The role of the social worker is, therefore, central to all aspects of foster care.

The national standards for foster care set out a range of standards to be attained for the child, the foster carer and Tusla. Specifically, there is a requirement for the child to have a dedicated social worker and the foster carer to have a dedicated link social worker who provides support to the foster carer. A child and family social worker visits the child in the foster home and maintains links with the child's birth family. This role centres on a responsibility for the safety and welfare of the child. The national standards for foster care set out the requirements of the roles of the child in care social worker, and the link social worker. The specific requirements of each of these roles are outlined in appendix 1.

Standard 5 requires a designated social worker for each child and young person in foster care. Standard 14 requires the assessment and approval of foster carers by a trained and qualified social worker. Standard 15 requires that approved foster carers are supervised by a professionally qualified social worker, also known as the link social worker, to ensure that foster carers have access to the information, advice, and professional support to enable them to provide

high quality care. Standard 16 requires that foster carers participate in the training necessary to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to provide high quality care. Standard 17 requires foster carers to participate in regular reviews of their continuing capacity to provide high quality care and to assist with the identification of gaps in the fostering service. The provision of both standards 16 and 17 are also a requirement of the link social worker. All of these standards are clear in the requirement for social workers to carry out these statutory functions. Without the required numbers of social workers, there are significant pressures on our children in care system.

The committee has invited IFCA to discuss the challenges to the retention and recruitment of social workers in Tusla. The requirements and roles of the social worker are many and varied, and it is for this reason that I have listed those requirements as set in the national standards in appendix 1 of this paper. The child in care is required to have his or her own social worker and the foster carer is also required to have his or her own link social worker. There are currently more than 6,000 children in care and more than 4,500 foster families, and they all require the services of social workers.

IFCA is aware of the current shortfall of social workers and of foster families and children who do not have an allocated social worker. The shortfall is acute in some local Tusla areas. The challenge is that the many requirements for children and foster carers, as required under the national standards, are not being met. For example, some foster carers do not have a link social worker. The impact of this is that they do not have access to supports required, particularly when the foster carer requires support in identifying pressures building within the placement. Research indicates that prior to the making of an allegation of abuse against a foster carer by a child, the foster carer noted increased behavioural problems, and many requested respite supports prior to the allegation being made.

For the child, the absence of a dedicated social worker does not allow the child to build and maintain a meaningful relationship with the person who is charged with being his or her corporate parent. It is important for children to develop a trusting relationship with their social worker, particularly if they are unhappy with any aspect of their placement. On a practical level, the child's social worker is responsible for giving consent for all aspects of the child's life such as going on school tours, sleepovers with friends and travelling with the foster family. The absence of a social worker to give written consent may mean that the child cannot participate in the normal everyday activities of other children.

IFCA is aware of the ongoing strategies of Tusla to recruit more social workers and as is true with any employer, retention of staff is key as well as recruitment. During 2018, while 142 social workers were employed within Tusla, 158 social workers left, as a result of retirement and movement to different sectors. This places great strain on Tusla to meet its statutory requirements for children in care and for foster carers. Analysis of the reasons for movement to other employment of any staff through exit interviews informs an employer's staff retention strategies and may inform Tusla of the causes of such movement. It has been suggested in presentations to the committee by other contributors that the number of social worker graduates annually falls short of the requirements of Tusla, and that the Minister and her Department have initiated discussions with third level institutions to seek solutions.

The rationale for setting out the role and responsibility of the child in care social worker and the foster carer link social worker is to propose that some aspects of the role could be carried out by a transdisciplinary team, including a range of suitably qualified professionals. Tusla could develop teams of social workers and allied health professionals which provide a range of ser-

vices and supports to children in care and to foster carers, supervised by a team social worker. The combination of roles and responsibilities could enhance the service to children and foster families appropriately but also reduce some of the requirements of the social worker, enabling them to focus on the key statutory requirements of the role. For example, a social care worker or allied health professional could support the children during access visits with their families if they are uncontested. They could also assist in co-ordinating care planning meetings or professionals' meetings and make referrals for specialist services for the child under the direction of the social work team leader. Allied healthcare professionals could support foster carers in aspects of their role, doing one-to-one work with children, whether practical or therapeutic, and offering timely support to foster carers with the link social workers retaining the supervisory role. All of this work would support the work of the social worker who always holds statutory responsibility.

Greater enhanced rights for foster carers could eliminate the requirement for the social worker to give consent and where a child is in a long-term stable placement, the foster carer could assume more autonomy. IFCA has included this suggestion to Department of Children and Youth Affairs in its submission in the review of the Child Care Act 1991. Such supports to current social workers would reduce some of their core role as well as having more manageable caseloads, and thus support retention. Other supports to the role of the social worker could be to engage an organisation such as IFCA, the representative body for foster care in Ireland, to co-ordinate and offer training and support groups to foster carers, in collaboration with and on behalf of Tusla. IFCA is in the unique position in that it currently provides such services already.

Tusla takes a child into care where there is a concern for his or her welfare or protection. Front-line social work is demanding and challenging, and social workers working in this area require manageable caseloads and higher levels of support. Consideration could be made to having a lessened caseload, higher levels of support and supervision, and offering additional allowances to those working at the front line to ensure retention of skills and knowledge.

The challenges of entering social work can be great and overwhelming for any new graduate. Consideration could be given to offering new social work staff a mentor for the first 12 months in their new role. This will support the new social workers and provide them with access to expertise and knowledge as they embark on their new role within Tusla. Group supervision and peer support is evidenced as being of great support and learning to all staff. Having forums which offer regular peer support and shared learning would enhance the employment environment for new staff. UK and Northern Ireland universities offer social work qualifications to social care staff who wish to attain a qualification in social work. These qualifications are gained through a combination of in-work placement and part-time study. Currently, any postgraduate student who wishes to study social work in Ireland must return to college on a full-time basis. This is not feasible for many employed social work staff. In addition, social care staff generally work in the areas of residential care, addiction and homelessness services, which offers them comprehensive insight into the challenges faced by children and families. These staff have a wealth of knowledge, skills and expertise to bring with them to study the requirements of social work. To attract such students, bursaries could be offered by Tusla to attract social care workers to study social work in third level institutions which will provide this mode of study, who would then be required to remain in employment with Tusla for a defined period.

IFCA welcomes this opportunity to share its knowledge and experience of foster care in Ireland with the committee, and our suggestions for the recruitment and retention of social workers in Tusla, who play a vital role in the area of children in care in Ireland, of whom there

are 6,044. IFCA advocates for excellence in foster care in Ireland on behalf of our members and we work in close collaboration with Tusla to achieve this. We are fully supportive of Tusla's drive to recruit and retain social work staff and offer our suggestions to support this. Foster care is the backbone of childcare in Ireland and requires robust infrastructure to support it. Without social workers and the required supports, this cannot be achieved. Foster carers must receive the supports required to enable them to care for children with very complex problems on behalf of the State. Supports must be timely and available, and foster carers should not have to lobby for services which are a right for children, or for the right to have a dedicated social worker to support them in their fostering role. The national standards for foster care requires that both children in care and foster carers have dedicated social workers. IFCA acknowledges that Tusla has made improvements in the allocation of social workers. However, to achieve a full complement of staff to meet the needs of both children in care and foster carers, we need to identify other ways to ensure that the requirements of the standards are achieved. This may be achieved through the implementation of the suggestions proposed by IFCA today. I thank the committee.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Bond. Her concluding line sums up the purpose of these committee hearings, which is to determine how we can get more social workers into the system and keep them there.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** I thank Ms Bond and Mr. Murphy for attending the committee this morning. Perhaps it is just me, but I was very shocked to read that there are more than 6,000 children in State care. It is a far higher number than I expected. It is sad that so many children have to go into State care. It puts substantial pressure on the system and on foster care families. What is case load for a social worker? How many families would a link social worker ordinarily have in his or her workload? How many children in foster care do social workers working in that area have to manage? Are social workers working way beyond capacity?

The witnesses said that the national standards for foster care are not being met because of the shortage of social workers. Can they identify the standards that are not being met? A list was provided at the back of the appendix, but which standards are being left to one side? They also said that there is a shortfall in the number of social workers, but that it is more acute in some Tusla areas. Where are the problem areas in the country?

I take on board and agree with some of the solutions offered by the witnesses. It is great to see that solutions are being offered. There are only so many graduates that can progress through college at any one time. Enhancing the rights of foster parents to do more, including signing consent forms, for example, seems very practical and reasonable. What was the response of the Department when that suggestion was made? Are the witnesses still waiting for a response? I am also particularly interested in the fact that social workers here have to go back to full-time education whereas in the UK in-house training and part-time study options are available, which makes far more sense. If one is in full-time work, paying bills and looking after a family, leaving work to go and study full-time is just not feasible. Has that been put to the Department? What was its response?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** We do not have definitive numbers for the case loads for social workers, children in care social workers and link social workers for foster carers. There is an approximate guideline of around 30 cases per social worker, but that can be quite a high number, depending on the complexity of the issues facing the children in care. We also note from our members who are foster carers that if a new infant is placed in foster care, a court can direct that the foster carer bring that baby to access four or five times a week to attain and retain an attachment with the child's birth parent. It is crucially important, but it requires that a social

worker ensures that access happens. The courts are also directing that social workers report to the court more frequently, especially with younger patients. While these are all very important tasks, they are very time-demanding for social workers. The question of weighting case loads is something to which Tusla should respond. There are structures within the agency to allow for weighted case loads.

In terms of standards not being met, the most recent HIQA report, which was a combined report on foster care standards, highlighted the need for foster care reviews to be undertaken. This was not work that was conducted in the past.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** Is Ms Bond referring to a care plan review?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** No, I refer to the foster care review. Within the national standards for foster care review, foster carers are required to undergo a review every six months after the first placement and regularly for a number of years thereafter. This is an opportunity for the foster carer to reflect on the foster care placement, on his or her own learning and development and the needs of the children for whom they are caring. The increase in the regularity of reviews for foster carers is also placing more time restrictions on social workers. It is about finding a balance between the increased demands on the need for foster carers and the increased demands by children in care. We have to consider what is reasonable and realistic for a social worker to do in that respect.

As my colleague mentioned, there is a requirement for social workers to provide regular support and supervision to foster carers. That is a requirement and regularly occurs-----

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** It is quite a broad requirement, so it is easy to-----

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Yes, it is quite broad. It provides an opportunity for both the link social worker and the foster carer to identify the supports required for the placement, but it does not always happen because of the demands on social workers. On the flip side, it leaves foster carers feeling very vulnerable and volatile. If they are dealing with a child with very complex behaviours and needs and contending with that in their family unit all day, every day, without the associated supports, it can be very challenging. In turn, it can contribute to placement breakdowns.

In terms of the areas with more acute problems, we are aware from meetings with the local area manager in the Carlow-Kilkenny area that there is a severe shortage of social workers in that geographical area. While the local team are making a great effort to ensure that services are delivered, they are spread very thinly because the number of social workers is not being recruited in some of those areas. Laois-Offaly is another area where new social workers had been recruited, but because others left, there is a shortage again.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** Are Carlow-Kilkenny and Laois-Offaly the two blackspots?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** To the best of our knowledge-----

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** It ebbs and flows.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** How are the inner-city areas in Dublin, Limerick and Cork, for example?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Dublin south-central is another area that is facing severe pressure, where there are very high levels of children in care. New social workers are coming in but are

moving on very quickly. I refer to our opening statement where I said that it is critical for a child in care to develop a very open and trusting relationship with the social worker overseeing his or her care. It is very important that the child is allowed to build up this relationship. If he or she has anything he or she wants to say or is unhappy with a placement, it is important that he or she has a named person with whom a relationship has been developed and who is available so that anything that needs to be disclosed can be disclosed. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is working to respond to our submission under the review of the Child Care Act. We will seek an update on that.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** On the issue of upskilling without having to go back to full-time education, has there been any discussion with the Department about how training might be restructured?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** It is part of our submission to the Department. The review of the Child Care Act is looking at the concept of permanency for children in foster care. There are many children who spend many years with foster families who may not require the same high level of social work support, and subsequently the family could be allowed more autonomy. The concept of enhanced rights for foster carers allows that they can give consent in certain areas in the child's life if the child has been with that foster carer for more than five years. The foster parent in that instance would not be required to contact a social worker if a child is to go on a school trip, for example. At the moment, a social worker has to give consent to that, meaning that he or she has to go to the house to give consent or the foster carer has to go to the Department to get consent. Those are regular, normal, nice things for children, and the last thing anyone wants is for a child in care not to be able to go on a school trip because nobody was available to give the consent. The area of enhanced rights for foster carers has to be looked at so that consent can be offered for certain areas of the child's life. This proposal formed part of our submission to the Department.

**Chairman:** Are the consents that can be provided by a foster carer absolute? Is there a complete blanket ban on providing consents or can some small things be done at the minute?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Under the Child Care Act the social worker, being the corporate parent of the child, offers all consents. That might involve a school outing or holidays with the foster family. There is a lot of red tape involved. It could be beneficial to revisit the enhanced rights which were part of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2007. A child who is doing well and is in a stable placement is most likely to stay with that family for his or her entire life. Many members of the Irish Foster Care Association, IFCA, have children who came to them as babies and are now with them into adulthood and beyond. They are not going anywhere. It regularises life for the child and the family.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** A carer has to refer to a social worker for permission to do anything that requires a signature. That is time consuming and can be very frustrating both for social workers and for foster carers.

**Deputy Lisa Chambers:** That concludes my questions. I thank the witnesses.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I thank the witnesses for being here today. This meeting is certainly assisting us in understanding the dynamic between the IFCA, the people it represents, and officialdom. How would the witnesses characterise the IFCA's relationship with Tusla? Is it a positive relationship? Does the IFCA leadership feel it is being listened to and its recommendations are bearing some fruit?



**Ms Catherine Bond:** The Irish Foster Care Association has a very good relationship with Tusla. We meet Tusla at senior level, including with the CEO and director of operations, and at local level. It is a constructive relationship through which we can raise issues of concern for foster carers. That is what our organisation is there for. It is also a constructive relationship in that we seek to find solutions together. Ultimately, everybody is working in the best interests of children and to ensure that foster care retains that very valuable status in society. We are quite unique in Ireland in our approach to children in foster care.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** The witnesses noted that foster carers do not have a link social worker. That suggests to me that there is a big gap. The foster carer and the child have the right to a social worker. Could the risk increase dramatically if the relationship between the carer and the child deteriorates in any way? If we do not have an accurate figure for how many of the 5,000 children in foster care arrangements are without a link social worker, there is a possible or potential risk of some of those relationships being in a state of disrepair. We might not know that.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** The optimal situation is for a link social worker to be allocated to the foster carer. As it stands, foster carers have access to a social worker. There is no gap. Foster carers have a number by which to contact Tusla if they have a concern. Foster carers generally use the Irish foster carers' helpline quite frequently. If they have a problem, they resort to our helpline and we put them in contact with the most appropriate person. Foster carers are assured that there is somebody to call, but the relationship is very important.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** The theme here is recruitment and retention. We are trying to plug that gap, so to speak. If there is no link social worker for a particular family and issues arise for the foster carer or the child, the risk is offset by a mechanism allowing the foster carer to contact the IFCA via the helpline. Does recourse exist for a child where he or she is at risk? We assume the relationship is benign and positive and we concur with Ms Bond about the good work done by people who care for children in a fostering arrangement. We have to have regard, however, to the fact that if there is a shortage of social workers, the risk profile increases and child protection issues become even more prevalent. If there are 5,000 children in foster care arrangements, and like the witnesses we do not have exact figures, there is a major gap in the service and the risk to children is potentially increased. That is my impression. Perhaps the witnesses can disavow me of that or help me to understand further.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** There is a natural risk in any case where a social worker has not been allocated. If there has been a break, for example, when a foster worker has not had a social worker for some time and is then allocated one, it can take time for a relationship to build. Decisions may have been made during the period without a social worker. A new social worker might have to backtrack and fix some of those decisions.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** If I understand Mr. Murphy correctly, some foster carers do not have a link social worker and as such they do not have access to supports as required. If I interpret that correctly, he is saying there are gaps. Does the IFCA have a numerical analysis of the gaps? How many children are without a link social worker at present?

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** While they may not have an allocated social worker, carers have access to a team leader so they will always be able to contact somebody in Tusla. They have access to a team leader or a principal social worker in the area and will be able to access information. They will not be without any contact. They will always have a contact with somebody.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** There is nobody in the system who is literally cast adrift.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** I cannot really say, but nobody could be in that position. Carers are in the system. They are placed on a panel and governed by the foster care committee. A principal social worker and a team leader are available. Somebody is there to support them in some capacity.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** This discussion is all about developing our understanding of the dynamic. Who exactly is on the foster care committee?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** The foster care committee is made up of a number of professionals. The foster care committee guidelines are quite prescriptive. The committee includes an area medical officer, a psychologist, a principal social worker and a range of other professionals. Foster carers also sit on the committee. It is quite an onerous body to put oneself before for approval as a foster carer.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I refer again to recruitment and retention. The former Deputy Pat Rabbitte is now chair of Tusla. He came before the committee some weeks ago and the recruitment and retention of social workers was a key area that he wanted to discuss. In parallel with the IFCA, he also raised bridging education that would upskill social care staff. If people have identified this as an issue that has been ongoing for many years, why has the system not bridged that gap? Why is it that instead of going back into full-time education, social care staff cannot do a bridging or postgraduate course that would see them suitably qualified? What is the IFCA's perception of the gaps there? Why has that not happened?

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** To train and qualify as a social worker is a rigorous process. It takes a lot. A member of staff will have gone through a degree in social care. They will have a certain level of training and a certain perspective on their training. Social work is a different profession from social care. There should and could be a practical way to solve that issue through some mechanism such as the Deputy described. It should be possible to bring qualified social care workers who have a degree into the other profession in a more streamlined way than what is required at the moment, which is to go back and do a full-time, two-year master's degree.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** It was suggested that bursaries could be provided by Tusla.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** If we are talking about recruitment and retention, requiring someone to go back to university, when they already have an undergraduate degree which the Government has already funded, is going to incur costs. It is about trying to be creative and seeing what could be possible. Something like that certainly could be attractive to people. On the flip side, they would have to sign up to being with Tusla for a period of time if they were in receipt of that kind of bursary, which would assure the retention of those staff into the future with Tusla.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Demand for foster care places is increasing. The figures are approximately 6,000 in care and 5,000 in foster care. How do we encourage people to become foster carers or foster parents, to use that expression? Where is the gap and why are more people not taking up that challenge?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** The Irish Foster Care Association has just concluded fostering fortnight, which ran from 4 March to 15 March. It is a two-week promotion of foster care and the benefits of being a foster carer. In parallel to it, we run an annual survey. We ask foster carers what attracts them to being a foster carer and what they offer. The majority would say if that anyone who wants to become a foster carer should talk to another foster carer as that is the best

way to get information, as well as doing their own research. That is what our survey showed.

We really need to ensure that we retain our current foster carers as well as creating the environment for others to enter into becoming foster carers. It all comes back to the importance of supports for foster carers. It is really critical when somebody says they have a child with very complex needs, the placement is getting very stressed and they are all very stressed in the household, that somebody is there to respond and de-escalate the situation. If somebody has the supports that are required, he or she will stick with the task.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Would Ms Bond characterise the challenges that foster carers face at the moment as being extremely difficult in the main? The perception I have is that for foster carers, the placement can be quite difficult if they do not have supports. Presumably foster carers are constantly fighting with the HSE and Tusla for additional services.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** That would be the case for some foster carers. Our national support helpline took over 900 calls last year from foster carers, who were generally seeking help. As I would always say, people do not generally ring our helpline to say things are fantastic and life is great. They call when they are experiencing a difficulty or require assistance and supports. That is the objective of our helpline. We have part-time national advocates who can meet with foster parents, as well as national support volunteer advocates. Prevention is always the best cure. If the supports are there, foster carers are feeling held and supported and they have the necessary tools to do the job they are tasked to do, that is a good news story for foster care.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** Ireland is a small country and word of mouth is a strong factor in terms of fostering in communities, local branches and hubs around Ireland. If people are experiencing difficulties in these areas, there is going to be a natural spill into the community as to how positively they regard that role.

**Chairman:** Perhaps it might be useful for the members to be provided with a brief overview of the nature of the calls that might be received by that helpline from foster carers.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** We provide an annual report in terms of the nature of the calls. We can provide breakdowns of the counties in which issues are quite prevalent. In the past, the vast majority of calls were around how to become a foster carer but that is decreasing now. The predominant ones now would be, for example, where an allegation of some kind has been made against a foster carer and he or she has just received the news, is very distressed and picks up the phone. I might pass this on to Mr. Murphy because he is dealing with these issues at the coalface.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** The areas that are particularly prevalent are allegations; difficulties with access, demands placed on foster carers, difficulties around arrangements, all of that kind of stuff; and after care. We have come a long way in dealing with the after care issue. There is a national standardised process rolled out around that which has worked really well. Underlying all of the issues is a communications issue in terms of with working with Tusla, the demands placed on foster carers, their understanding of the limits of their role, their desires to be able to be parents to these children while being able to enjoy family life, being able to provide these children with the normal experiences. Sometimes that goes wrong and things do not go to plan. Things can be reported on or understood in different ways and there can be difficulties in trying to work all of that out so that everybody can come to an understanding of the situation. Relationships can be eroded during those times of conflict, particularly in respect of allegations if a child has a perception that he or she was mistreated. A foster carer might have a totally dif-

ferent understanding of what happened but that child might have to be removed for their own safety and the placement might naturally have to end at that point. It is a very complicated and convoluted situation.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** In terms of access, I referred earlier to cases where there is a new infant. Obviously the desire is always that a new infant would go home to the natural parent and all attempts are made to ensure that happens. However, if there is a requirement for the foster carers to attend access four, five or six times a week, their family suffers and their own children do not get to go to soccer practice or dance practice. We must remember that foster care is taking place in a family home, not in an institution. It is around the demands on the foster carers and the need to be realistic that they are providing care to a child but it is within the context of a family home.

**Chairman:** I have two additional questions before I provide time to Deputy Mitchell. There are about 6,000 children in foster care in the State. Would the witnesses have any figures or any idea as to how we might compare with some of our near neighbours in terms of the prevalence of foster care as a support for children growing up in environments inappropriate to a successful upbringing, if there is such a thing? Based on our population is there comparative data?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** We actually compare very favourably not just with our near neighbours but within the European context. We have the highest number of children growing up in family care as opposed to institutional or other types of care. The Irish Foster Care Association would always say that foster care is the jewel in the crown for children in care in the Irish State. It is an area that needs to be protected, supported and invested in.

**Chairman:** What is Ms Bond's view on agency social workers within Tusla who might be working with foster families across the country? I think the Irish Foster Care Association represents 1,300 foster families, is that correct?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** The figure is approximately 2,000. There is a need for social workers and if there is a shortage, there is a need for other types of social workers. Everyone has had the same level of training regardless of who their employer is.

**Chairman:** Does the Irish Foster Care Association see any practical difference?

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** The agency is not as permanent. The idea around children in care is to have as permanent a situation as possible for children in families, if that family is permanent, and for the people who are supporting that family to have a permanency around them also. Obviously there are times that people have to move on and change but the current level of change is seen as a lot to absorb by many families with regard to different styles and personalities and so on. If agency staff are being used there will, invariably, be a tendency for agency staff to move on quicker than permanent staff. Employing agency staff before permanent staff gets back to a level of risk.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** It is not a lot of staff but at the same time it provides a stopgap. Foster carers, however, routinely would say to us that they have to go back to the beginning and tell the story all over again with each person. The children in care would also say the same. It is not fair to ask children in care to keep rehashing the reasons they are in care or so on.

**Chairman:** Would the witnesses be aware of the numbers in this regard? If a child is referred to and reared by a foster family, how many social workers would the foster carer or child go through over the course of the fostering of that child? I am not sure of the length of the aver-

age stay, but let us say it is ten years. In the normal course of affairs how many times will the child and the family have to retell the story?

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** I cannot really say. People have told us that in making their support calls they may have dealt with four different social workers in one year.

**Chairman:** It is problematic.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** That might just be an outlier and we have to accept there are outliers in every situation, but for that child and the family it is not necessarily going to be a good working relationship.

**Chairman:** My last question relates to the regional disparity in recruitment and retention that was referenced in the opening statement. There are some black spots, which Ms Bond mentioned when responding to Deputy Chambers. Of great concern to me is the area of Dublin's inner city. Have we seen a rise in the number of gaps in the system with children or foster families not being allocated a social worker as a result or is the figure plateauing? I appreciate that there is a deficiency in the service. This goes without saying. We know there are not enough social workers. Part of the role of this committee is to determine how we get more into the system, based on the output. Unfortunately, the output is insufficient and so we have to be creative. That is why the representatives' input is so important to us. Perhaps they could try to provide further information on that.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** The black spots we mentioned had a full complement of social workers and it then reduced back again. The anecdotal evidence from foster carers is that in one particular area they did not have any social workers for a while, then they got a great and wonderful team and things were going really well and everyone was delighted. Then those social workers left again very quickly. Maybe it goes back to getting under the rationale of why people are leaving. This is why exit interviews are very important. If possible, they could be done anonymously on a portal or online. We need to know why people are taking up jobs and then leaving the jobs. Until we have that data we will not really know how we can assist in retaining social workers.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** I am sure that the decision to move to any job starts at least six months to one year before a person starts to move. There is probably a cohort that is contemplating leaving or wondering about their future. It would be worth doing something like that to capture that and try to prevent it from happening.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** A small piece of research directed at social workers, perhaps through focus groups, might elicit that information. People who have left could also contribute to that.

**Chairman:** It certainly would be very beneficial to the whole system if that was to occur.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I thank Ms Bond for her presentation. I want to ask a few brief questions because there was much touched on there. Ms Bond has said that the Irish Foster Care Association, IFCA, has 2,036 members. How does a foster carer become a member? Are the foster carers aware of the organisation? There are 4,523 foster carers so it appears to be nearly half and half. Perhaps Ms Bond could address this first.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** With the IFCA membership people can join up online. When a person has been before a foster care committee and has just been approved as a foster carer it is a wonderful day but it important that the information is disseminated by the committee to a

new foster carer to point out the support organisations that will support and assist the foster carer. We achieve membership through promotion of fostering fortnight and through various campaigns we run. We have also been in discussion with Tusla to look to see how more new foster carers can become members of IFCA. We offer an insurance policy to foster carers that protects them in the event of any allegation being made against them. It offers the foster carers legal protection. It is essential that foster carers would become members of IFCA. It is always a challenge to seek and promote to get new members in. This is one of our key objectives.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** Private foster care agencies would automatically take up membership with us for their foster carers.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Five agencies do.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** Five agencies automatically do.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** It is not mandatory with Tusla. Tusla does not sign any foster carer up to the-----

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Our membership fee is minimal. That could be looked at. Again, it comes back to the appreciation of the task one is doing and that foster carers would automatically be signed up as members. It is certainly something we have discussed and something we would like to see.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** When it was discussed with Tusla what response was the IFCA given?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** There was an openness to see how we can achieve it. We will continue to work with Tusla in that regard. A very simple solution might be that the membership is paid for any new foster carer so that as part of any new foster carer pack the carer would get membership of IFCA.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** Many foster carers would call us eventually. We take calls from non-members. They would call and say "We did not know you existed". They find that we would be able to assist them and they might join us then.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** On the calls taken by the IFCA, what are the hours for the helpline?

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** We are open Monday to Friday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** That is 11 a.m to 3 p.m., Monday to Friday. How many calls would relate to a child without a social worker or a foster carer without a link worker?

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** I would have to come back to the Deputy with those numbers as I do not have them off the top of my head.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I would appreciate that. There is no doubt that we have a recruitment crisis. It is important to acknowledge the hard work that social workers actually do.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** Absolutely.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I have a personal experience of this. In my eyes social workers are amazing because not only are they the child's social worker, he or she also becomes the child's best friend. Children turn to them. It is exactly what the witness has said. It is not only

about replacement: it is every aspect of the child's life. It is important that we hold on to staff. Reference was made to families turning in. I am aware of young children who went through eight social workers. That has an impact. Why are we losing this great resource? There are fantastic people in Tusla. Why are they walking away? Is it down to the workload? Is it the stress of the job? Ms Bond has said that it could affect up to 30 cases per social worker. Am I correct in saying that the social worker could be doing access with the children plus arranging all of the child's needs, including therapeutic? One placement could have four children being looked after by the social worker plus the other 29 cases.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** It is important to note that 30 cases is an indicative number. That figure would have to go back to Tusla to be clarified. The Deputy is correct that for every child in foster care, and every foster carer who is parenting a child in foster care, that foster carer would have to have the foster care review, the support and the supervision and information about access. It is that sort of work. We may need to go to court on a number of occasions for that child. That is why it was important to outline specifically the roles and responsibilities of both the linked social worker and the child care and social worker. The task is enormous and we need to support our social workers to do this serious and important job. We must provide whatever supports can be offered to allow them to do that job to the best of their ability, to retain our foster carers and support our children in care because it is incumbent on everyone to ensure we retain what we have.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Is there a role for foster carers themselves? There is a lot of work for a social worker to do in the review stages. In some cases where voluntary care orders have been made, a review may take place twice or three times a year. Is there a role, therefore, for foster carers who sometimes feel some of this can be a box-ticking exercise and that they have no responsibility under it? When it comes to Garda vetting is there a way to give responsibility to foster carers to have these in place themselves? When one's car is due an NCT, one gets a text message. Is there a way foster carers could help to reduce workloads by doing this themselves?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Foster carers have an onerous task and I would not request that any more layers be put on them. However, I would advocate for and support foster carers to prepare themselves in respect of what they bring to a foster-care review. We have offered training to foster carers in that regard lately and will continue to do so. That is very much around the foster carer who comes to the foster-care review being informed and knowledgeable, identifying continuing professional development needs and issues in the foster care placement and bringing solutions forward. The review involves a two-way relationship. It is a two-way process rather than simply a box-ticking exercise.

In respect of Garda vetting, the person who is charged with doing the vetting must provide the links to the vetting service. Someone will have to push that button to allow the foster carer to respond.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Ms Bond mentioned the strain on foster parents in respect of access and so on. Does the association receive many calls from foster carers with concerns about increased access? This also affects social workers. If it is a supervised situation, staff are required to supervise the additional access. Circumstances can vary. When a placement commences, there might be access for just one family member but down the line that can change. Is that an issue the association gets calls about? It places a strain on people.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** Access presents one of the higher levels of difficulty that we experi-

ence on the helpline. Some children have sibling access and grandparent access with lots of different access meetings to attend. Social workers have to co-ordinate that and foster carers have to respond to it. They have their own lives to arrange around all of that which can be very problematic, in particular where an increase is court ordered and has to be adhered to. Strains will be placed on every party in that relationship to achieve the access for the child. Access can be emotionally difficult for children who can have behavioural problems before and after access visits. That can place a great strain on everyone involved and the emotional labour can be difficult. Sometimes, we fail to take sufficient account of the emotional labour for everyone involved in those dynamics for children. It can be very stressful.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** It is important. I am not taking from the fact that children need to have access, but I am concerned that every access visit requires a report from the social worker. Is that correct?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Yes, and attendance.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** That social worker could have four access visits in different cases.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** And must then write up the reports. One other aspect of access is that the geographic location of the placement may be some distance from the child's family of origin. That places a huge strain on foster carers because they have to put up substantial mileage to get from A to B on a given day, in particular if the child has been placed outside his or her community. That has certainly introduced higher demands in respect of access for both social workers and foster carers.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I thank the witnesses for their informative submission and responses. This time last year, I was driving to Leinster House during what must have been fostering fortnight, to which they referred, as an interview on Sean O'Rourke's programme with a couple who had fostered many, many times and gone on to adopt was broadcast. It raised the matter in my consciousness as something to be explored later in life. It was such a powerful piece. Everyone needs recognition and acknowledgment. One of my other policy interests is the arts. Artists go continually ignored and unrewarded. How can we give greater recognition and acknowledgement to social workers?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Everyone needs recognition and support in any job. That requires firstly recognition and appreciation of the work one does. That is very important but sometimes negative comments may be made about social work and social work staff. Even changing the narrative to a positive one could be helpful. Great work is being done within Tusla to support staff with research and development functions and portals where staff can link to more information and peer support. It always comes back to the need for society to recognise the value that someone brings to whatever walk of life they are in and then the need for the employer to recognise it. Employment recognition can take many forms whether it is remuneration or in the terms and conditions of work. It is very much around changing the narrative initially.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** We respect GPs and nurses who have received powerful public support. However, public support is not so high profile here. Ms Bond mentioned terms and conditions and pay. Is pay an issue?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** I cannot answer that. That is part of public service pay agreements. Certainly, it is very much around what the Senator mentioned himself, namely public recogni-



tion. Social workers work in different fields. For example, medical social workers work with families at times of great distress and illness. One also has social workers engaged with children in care and child protection social work, which can be very complex. Social workers may work with families to protect children, which can mean removing the child from the family. That can be contentious.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** Social work is a therapeutically-orientated practice, which we have probably forgotten along the way given its significant administrative and legal aspects. It straddles all of those forums but ultimately as a social worker, one works in the area of human rights and the rights of children and the work should be valued as that. There needs to be a general awareness of what the role of social workers is. It should be seen as a practice and a therapeutic endeavour social workers are trying to achieve.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I ask this because there is a role for us to play. We occupy public spaces when we make or write speeches. In making contributions, we should recognise those positive effects. The witnesses replied to the question of whether there was a shortage of prospective foster carers but do they think issues relating to social worker retention affect the number of persons who will consider providing foster care?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** As we said earlier, we absolutely know the number one reason for somebody to think about becoming a foster carer is definitely talking to another foster carer and hearing of their experiences. If somebody is hearing of negative experiences, it is not going to be quite as attractive.

There is always a need for foster carers because children are always coming into care. There is an acute shortage of foster carers at present. Foster carers who are retiring are not being replenished at the back end, as it were. As Senator Warfield said, foster care is in a unique position. Foster carers play a fantastic role in what they offer our society.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** Does Ms Bond say it is unique in Ireland because it is an alternative to institutional care?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** If one studies the journey of the Irish State and institutional care, one sees the learnings from institutional care and then there were small residential care homes, and there were learnings from that. I suppose everybody knows that the optimum for a child is to grow up in a family and to have regular normal family life. That is what foster care is offering to all 6,000 children who are growing up today in foster care. The Irish Foster Care Association has a national annual conference every autumn and the foster carers and all the children come to that conference. It is the best sight in the world to see all of children, the birth children, the foster carers, and the families all together and everybody having a really good time. One sees the children in foster care who are doing so well, and even the children who are not doing so well, but all are cared for and loved. It would do anyone's heart good to see it.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** In the opening statement there was information front-loaded from the Irish Penal Reform Trust that children in foster care are not involved in the juvenile justice programme. Was there a reason that information was front-loaded? I would have no expectation that children in foster care would be involved in the juvenile justice system.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** That report was released three weeks ago and it was the first time that a study of that kind has been done, which looked at the cohorts of children who are in the juvenile justice system. The Irish Foster Care Association assisted in the research by providing

access to foster carers. There may be a requirement to strip that report back a little bit more as to whether there are children who are presenting with high levels of difficulties in placements and high levels of aggression. Foster carers are very resilient and robust and are less likely to report this to anybody. It is another good outcome and it is a measured outcome for children in foster care. Any new research that indicates the positive aspect of family home care for children is another testament to its benefit and value.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** There was a criminal justice contact for young people leaving residential care as opposed to foster care. One can look at that and compare it with the transition for young people leaving foster care who have a longer transition period. They might get aftercare and they might have that experience at a later time in their lives. Research might be needed.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I appreciate that. What numbers of social workers should we be aiming to recruit for the entire system to be fit for purpose?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** The Senator might have to refer that question to Tusla.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** On the enhanced rights for carers, everyday issues such as school tours should not be a problem. How much notice would a foster carer have to give a social worker to get consent for a school trip?

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** It is dependent on when the school notifies the pupils.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Many parents would attest to the fact that they find a note in the school bag when they are looking for something else and they discover that there is a school tour happening on the Friday. There is a dash to get the consent signed by the social worker, and the social worker might be in court for three days. They know the foster carer is looking for them and the foster carer continues to look for them but they are tied up doing other things. There can be the risk that the child does not get the consent and the child does not go on the school tour. That is not what we would want and that is the reason the enhanced rights for foster carers would be very important.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I can see an issue around medical consent being a step too far.

**Ms Catherine Bond:** I think it warrants a discussion. That is certainly part of the Irish Foster Care Association's submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the review of the Child Care Act. It is timely that we open up these discussions again.

**Mr. Andrew Murphy:** It would always be related to the care order for the child, be it a voluntary care order, interim care order or full care order. That will dictate the level and the foster carer's capacity to be able to make a decision around those issues as well. It is more nuanced than that.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** Would it require legislative change in the Act?

**Ms Catherine Bond:** Yes.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I thank the witnesses.

**Chairman:** I thank Senator Warfield. I thank the witnesses for coming before us this morning and for answering member's questions so fully. We will suspend for a few minutes to allow our next witnesses to take their seats.

*Sitting suspended at 11.27 a.m. and resumed at 11.33 a.m.*

**Chairman:** On behalf of the committee I welcome Ms Aine McGuirk, chairperson, and Mr. Joe McCarthy from the Irish Association of Social Workers, IASW. I thank the witnesses for making themselves available to us. I welcome the members again, as well as viewers who may be watching proceedings on Oireachtas television, to the public session of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs.

Before we commence, I am required to draw the witnesses' attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery to switch off their mobile phones as they may interfere with the recording systems and prevent parliamentary reporters from fulfilling their task. It also has a habit of interfering with the broadcasting of the proceedings. I advise the witnesses that any submission or opening statements they make to the committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting. After their presentation there will be engagement from the members. I call on Ms Aine McGuirk to make her opening statement.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** We are delighted to appear before the committee today and hope that the IASW can be of assistance to the members in their deliberations on the issue of recruitment and retention in Tusla. I am Aine McGuirk, chair of the Irish Association of Social Workers, and with me today is Joe McCarthy, one of our members of long standing who has much experience in this area. I will keep this statement to five minutes so that we can explore issues and take questions. It will be quite short because I discovered that five minutes is quite short when one times oneself.

Social workers employed in the area of child protection and welfare practise their skills in a high-risk environment where there are no perfect solutions and where their efforts are rarely recognised or acknowledged. The nature of social work is dealing with risk, making the best professional judgment one can when one assesses a child's situation to be good enough for one to close the door and move on to the next child's story. These are incredible professionals and we must consider how we can promote a positive view of the work they do for children and families in crisis.

Social workers bring a range of skills to their work as they help clients negotiate the difficult and complex systems of Irish society in the 21st century. Families never complain when they have been waiting for a while for Tusla to come and complete an assessment of a child welfare concern. These are largely silent, involuntary clients in an imperfect world and the social worker's skill is in facilitating the family or child to achieve good outcomes often against impossible odds.

Social workers need to be properly supported to do this difficult work and to be acknowledged by society rather than being constantly blamed. Social workers championed the develop-

ment of child protection services. It was social workers who began to respond to child abuse in the 1970s beginning the process for a slow uncovering of a difficult and shameful past over the next decades.

The profession needs to attract the best to take on this work. It needs to be carried out to the highest standards. Social workers need to be bright, well educated, resilient, enthusiastic professionals with a drive for social justice and ethical practice. Members should consider if they would encourage their child to pursue this career and if not, why.

In the IASW we have been concerned about the recruitment and retention issues in Tusla for some time. We meet its chief operations officer, Jim Gibson, and its director of human resources, Colette Walsh. We see no evidence of a national recruitment campaign and potential candidates must go to the Tusla website to see if there are vacancies.

While recruitment is certainly a significant issue leading to an overuse of expensive agency staff and presents as a significant issue nationally, retention may in fact be the more significant problem. Just-qualified staff quickly find themselves dealing with complex child welfare and protection cases, complicated legal proceedings, and making life-changing decisions for children and families. To support staff we must also retain in-post team leaders and principal social workers who provide essential leadership in the provision of front-line services to children and families.

While all social work has stresses, the children and families sector is recognised as the most difficult work. These social workers exercise a statutory role, including the taking of proceedings under the Child Care Act 1991, and ensure the operation of State regulations with regard to children in care. The provision of care to children and families is complex with high demands from the law, the court and its agents. Social workers appear as applicants in the court for Tusla. Here, their professional actions and opinion are subjected to the highest scrutiny in a different way to other professionals who appear in the case as either agents of the court or professional witnesses. This can be extremely difficult and stressful for inexperienced social workers who are just doing their best to provide a professional service to the child who is the subject of the proceedings.

The work of Tusla comes under the scrutiny of the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, whose representatives spoke to this committee on this issue last month. The child and families sector is now the most regulated, inspected and audited area of social work. While regulation is necessary and useful in ensuring compliance with agreed standards, this scrutiny is grounds for further stresses, placing an emphasis on paperwork as evidence of work done, rather than on the practice of social work. The attendant negative attention from the media long after the inspection causes further stresses for perhaps already demoralised staff who work well beyond a standard working week to deal with the families on their caseload.

In 2019, social problems are more complex and acute than ever, and are more plentiful and concentrated in large urban centres. Abuse, ill-treatment and neglect are found across all communities. These situations are characterised by secrecy, emotional isolation, neediness, stress and lack of respect, often hidden under a cloak of normalcy. Social workers become very skilled in working with this kind of family but they require time and guidance to develop such competencies. Addiction, poor educational outcomes, abuse, unemployment, mental and physical health problems, intellectual disability, homelessness and injustice are the backdrop to the day-to-day work of a social worker. Today, drugs are available country wide, with their attendant social problems, deprivation and marginalisation. If one walks up Merchant's Quay,

Dublin or see a wet, dirty sleeping bag filled with a sleeper in a doorway, one may well be looking at the face of a parent of a child in care, or an adult that was raised in State care. These realities are a construction of society, not social work.

Tusla social workers deal with people in their homes and communities. Some communities have become hostile places increasing the risks associated with home visiting. Violence as a solution has become more commonplace, and guns and other weaponry are the tools of the drug dealer. Tusla social workers must deal with families in all these environments, including areas that other services sometimes refuse to enter.

Today, in some social work offices, there is security at the door, restricted entry to their buildings and meeting rooms monitored by closed-circuit television cameras. As a result, the social worker draws on all of their professional knowledge and training to deal with these families in an empathetic, supportive and helpful way. I am increasingly struck by the capacity of these young professionals to build relationships with individuals and families in this context, and give children a chance at a better life either with their parents or in the care of foster or residential carers. Fresh from college the young graduate may face an inevitable future as follows: work for Tusla for a couple of years - because that is where the jobs are - to get experience, and then move on to an agency where work is less high risk, clients are happy to engage, hours of attendance are predictable and conducive to a better work-life balance, and where public opinion is more positive, or work for a couple of years to earn enough money to travel and consider the future from far away sunnier climes. Tusla must work hard to become an employer of choice where the benefits of staying outweigh the stresses of the work. We understand that this is a difficult issue to solve quickly. We have made suggestions in our full submission, which members received. We are to address them now and answer any other questions they might have.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms McGuirk for her opening statement. I will call Members in reverse order, if other Members are willing, and call Senator Warfield.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** Sorry, Chairman, I have to run.

**Chairman:** Deputy Sherlock has indicated.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I sincerely thank the witnesses for being here today. Five minutes do not do justice to the wider submission IFCA supplied to the committee and I sincerely thank them for articulating a way forward for us, as a committee, to deal with the issues of recruitment and retention. I also thank Ms McGuirk for defending her colleagues because we live in times where it is easy to beat up on the social worker and he or she, in a judicial or societal setting, can be seen as the easy target for public opprobrium. While there have been cases in the recent past and historically, relating to the quality of engagement with social workers, that was the exception and not the norm. I have an appreciation on the basis of the submission and our deliberations on this issue of recruitment and retention generally, that it is the hidden work, which is undocumented, defines the quality of the engagement. One cannot put a HIQA, stamp on or tick a box for the relationship building, which is vital to sustain the very system that we have. Again, I thank the witnesses for their attendance here today and for their important submission because we now have something on which we can roll up our sleeves.

I would like to be educated on the day-to-day role of a social worker. My first question is on child protection and the welfare of children. We have had a very good interaction on foster care but I want to better understand how a case is triaged when it comes in the front door of Tusla or any other agency. How does a child protection case land on the desk of a social worker? We

have a good interaction on foster care but I would like to discuss child protection. How does a social worker, typically, secure a care order? Where is the social worker in the pecking order in respect of the legal framework to secure a care order? Let us say a social worker must go to court. What does a typical social worker have to do from the time a case lands on the desk front-of-house to securing a care order? How much paperwork is involved? Once the care order is successfully applied for, what is the ratio of contact time to administrative time? Is it 50:50 or 80:20? Does a social worker now have to do much more administrative work with much less contact time? Is that, within the existing cohort of social workers, having a bearing on outcomes for the relationship between the social worker and the child? Has that contributed to a malaise or a set of circumstances whereby a social worker, after a couple of years, faces burnout and decides to leave his or her post citing an inability to deal with the work any more? How can the nature of the relationship be changed in such a way that there is a larger quotient of social workers, a manageable workload and family-friendly hours? Social work is a female dominated profession. Women, in particular, will inevitably have families. What arrangements are put in place for a female social worker who wants to continue in her profession yet wants the requisite time off and work within hours that meet the needs of her own family while allowing her to continue professionally, progress careerwise and so on?

I have offloaded a load of issues. I have a picture in my own mind about social work but the witnesses will present a picture that will help us to deal with the key issues of recruitment and retention. I ask them to paint a picture for us of some of the points that I have outlined it will prove very useful.

**Chairman:** The Deputy has asked many questions.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** Yes. Regarding the process when a case is referred to a child coming into the care of the State, that is dealt with at several levels. We now have intake teams who triage the case. The case may be passed on to the child welfare team who try to work with the family and, perhaps, in time the child has to go into care. Mr. McCarthy has much more recent practice of this matter having served as a principal social worker and I would be grateful if he would address this.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** I now classify myself as being actively retired. I was a principal social worker for over 17 years, I was in child protection before that and I have been on the board of the IASW for a significant number of years. The Deputy asked many questions, which reflect his curiosity to understand and highlight the complexity of social work. As a preamble to that, let me say that I am delighted to be here because I consider the Dáil to be hallowed ground and a very important place for all Irish citizens. I am always somewhat in awe on the few occasions I have come here and I have always been interested in politics and how important it is. I appreciate the value and worth of what politicians do on behalf of us as citizens. I tinkered with the idea of entering into the field but my constituency is very well-served with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and with Deputies Micheál Martin, Michael McGrath and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire. I will give it a miss and this will be as far as I get.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** The local elections are coming if Mr. McCarthy wants to put on the jersey.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** I put it like that to show just how significant and important this issue of staff retention and recruitment within Tusla is. We are talking more specifically about staff retention and recruitment within child protection and welfare services. When we talk about the recruitment and retention of social workers within child protection and family welfare, we are

talking about child protection. In essence, we are talking about the regard we give it, how we value it, and what we are doing about it. Politicians know better than I do that child protection in the history of our relatively new Republic and State has not always been a priority, and the contrary has been the case. This is what gave rise to our industrial schools and the various scandals of the Magdalen laundries, mother and baby homes and institutional abuse at various levels. I am delighted that child protection and welfare is within the political arena, which is where it belongs. We are talking about political commitments and priorities. It has not always got the priority and the commitment it deserves. We are talking here about the most vulnerable of society, the hidden side that has been referred to by Ms McGuirk.

I was following very closely the conversation the committee had with the Irish Foster Care Association, and that raised some very interesting topics which were raised also by speakers on other days. One of the dangers is that we run the risk of reducing the very complex work of child protection and social work to a set of tasks and duties. There is almost the impression that anybody can do this work. I do not believe it is as black and white or as simple as that and is far more complex.

It would be very difficult to give the committee a picture of what a social worker does at any given time because they have different roles. Once referral comes in and is activated, the assessment begins immediately of what is to be done, what the identified needs are, followed by the putting in place of a plan of action and engagement with the family and children to see what is to be done. There may be different people involved with that. The duty and intake section does the screening and initial contact, and then decisions are made whether further contact or assessment is needed. The decision may be to go to court or not or to work in the community with preventative and supportive work.

One thing that was mentioned earlier and which is key to all of this, and this was mentioned by one of the previous speakers, is that social work, be it child protection or otherwise, is about getting involved in people's lives, intervening with them, trying to make a difference, and having good outcomes. That depends very much on the individual and training, but essentially it rests on the relationship that can be built up between the social worker and the child or the family. One of the aspects at the nub of the current crisis is that for various reasons and due to a lot of significant developments recently, social workers in child protection have transformed that role from what it was 15 years ago and it is not recognisable now. That core piece of work in having enough time to develop a relationship with a child or a family to make a difference over time, which for many is at the core of social work in any setting, is not possible. Perhaps the committee might be able to explore a little further the developments that have taken place in the past ten to 15 years. Social work, like any other profession, happens in a particular context. This was mentioned by other speakers on other occasions, where it is acknowledged by observers in the social work field that the decision to create a Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the subsequent establishment of Tusla as the child and family agency was a political imperative and very welcome. It was set up far too quickly with a totally insufficient budget. That accounts to a great extent for the immediate problems we might be experiencing. Tusla was expected to do an awful lot and did not have the wherewithal to do it. It was set up too with a budget that was and still is totally insufficient.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I appreciate the point that Mr. McCarthy is making, but to assist us and notwithstanding the fact that I made a lot of points to him earlier, where for instance a case comes in, is triaged and goes on for further assessments, if the case goes to court and a care order is required, I have a number of questions arising from that. I will be as brief as pos-

sible, allowing for the amount of time I have available, and forgive me if I took a lot of time at the start. What is the status of the social worker in the court setting? What is the contact time versus the administrative time? I would like to have an understanding of those two dynamics from our committee's interaction today with the Irish Association of Social Workers. The new chair of Tusla spoke about bridging courses to get people from social care to social work. What are the views of the association on that suggestion? How are academia and Tusla dealing with this idea? Everybody has acknowledged and knows the problem of recruitment. Should we be putting better therapeutic solutions and counselling in place for social workers themselves who work in child protection settings? Should we be designing family friendly policies for social workers? All of these thematic areas could contribute to a better outcome for social workers themselves and, ultimately and most importantly, for children and families.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** I will deal with the issue of the social worker when he or she reaches court. When I came into social work, and I have been around for a long time now, I was just as young and inexperienced as any graduate walking out of college. In those days, we had time, because in 1978 we had not really heard of child abuse then. Over the next decades, those issues emerged. With social workers like me, we had time to develop with this new knowledge and practice. The young social worker today comes straight out of college into that world where he or she may find him or herself very quickly in a High Court dealing with a young person who has very high needs. He or she is in court as an applicant for Tusla.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Okay.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** That is a very different role from being, for example, a guardian *ad litem*, a psychologist giving an expert opinion or anybody else. The social worker is the applicant and the parent is the respondent who will be aided by the State in that regard. The social worker has to stand there in a very alien world, dealing with judges, barristers and many legal teams.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Is the social worker, however, subject to cross-examination?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** Absolutely. There is no time nowadays for young social workers to learn how to be that professional. They have to be able to do it just after they have been given their qualification.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** There is massive element of stress involved in that.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** That is very stressful. The graduates are very capable but it is a bit like being handed one's driving licence and spending one's first day on the motorway. That is difficult. One has to learn with experience and over the following few years young social workers gather that experience. There is evidence to show that if one can keep people in the field for approximately five years, they seem to get to a point where they have settled into it, feel more professional, feel they know what they are doing a little better and want to stay. The challenge is holding the young professionals in those first few years.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** The Deputy mentioned the courts system. It is stressful and daunting. Other professionals are often given more credence and weight and the role of the social worker is gradually being eroded. I can give the example of guardians *ad litem*. The social workers in child protection see themselves as being there to protect and to advocate for the child but often that role is handed over to a guardian, who does not hold statutory responsibility, can develop a relationship with the child and whose function is different. That role is taken away from the social worker. Court has also become adversarial. Due process must be respected and I am



aware some work is being done on this but it can be extremely adversarial where everybody has a lawyer. If one puts young social workers into that setting and they do not have the time to gradually get used to it-----

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** However, they are represented by a solicitor.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** They are represented by a solicitor. What is happening as well, and this is linked to court proceedings, is that social work practice is increasingly being dictated by the legal world and by other professionals. Another example is where a social worker is involved with a family coming into care or otherwise. A parental assessment, which is the bread and butter of social work, is important work but that is being contracted to other professionals. One can see that, bit by bit, the essential role of the social worker is increasingly being limited, but to highly pressurised work and not necessarily specifically social work.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** My understanding is developing now. If the social worker goes into court he or she is represented in an adversarial system. Presumably, the social worker historically would have made the assessment and made a recommendation that the child should go into whatever setting is the most appropriate. Historically, that would have been accepted by the judge of the day. I am assuming this and Mr. McCarthy can correct me if I am wrong. We now have a system where there is a guardian *ad litem* and a social worker. Presumably the guardian *ad litem* has legal representation, the social worker has legal representation, the child is represented by the guardian *ad litem* and then there is the respondent. There could be five or six lawyers and probably a layer of experts on top of that again. There could be a psychologist or psychiatrist in the court. Is Mr. McCarthy saying that the psychologist or psychiatrist - he can tell us which is the appropriate profession - is then tasked with doing the assessment of the need or of the parent before a judgment is made?

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** They may be. Each case varies. Everybody can be represented legally so if one includes the parents as well, one is talking about a lot. That is right because there must be due process. We are concerned that the weight is developing. Do childcare proceedings have to take that form and be in that setting? Do they have to be so adversarial? It is a stressful time for everybody, including the social worker and parents. When a young social worker is handed a caseload where there might be court proceedings that can be overwhelming, daunting and huge pressure. Without manageable caseloads that are well supervised and a gradual induction into the process, it can be very overwhelming and quite soon a social worker will think, "I need to get out of here". When talking about recruitment and retention of social workers, the priority should be what can be done to keep what we have. The court is a small aspect of it, but very significant.

**Chairman:** I will let Deputy Neville in now. I can let Deputy Sherlock intervene later if he wishes.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I have several more questions.

**Chairman:** Yes, but please let Deputy Neville contribute, to be fair to him. The Deputy has had 20 minutes.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** That is fine.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I thank the witnesses for attending. I have some brief questions on recruitment. I am a member of a mental health committee and recruitment issues have arisen in that area because much of the recruitment takes place on a national platform as opposed to lo-

cally. Second, people are on panels, which are quite restrictive. They need to be more flexible. Is there a correlation between both?

Ms McGuirk referred to the pressure graduates feel coming into the workforce. I am a former teacher and when I graduated and went into the school on the first day, I went into the classroom alone and started there. It is quite daunting, but there is a time when one gets up to speed. However, I had senior staff I could call on, not directly but indirectly, as part of the collegiality that one would work on for advice. A principal teacher or vice principal teacher would offer advice. I taught woodwork and there were other woodwork teachers there I could speak to about a class. Is there something similar to that for social workers?

I understand there is a points system to get onto the course. In bygone times there would have been an interview process for some courses in college. Is there any value in that being reintroduced? It might alleviate the dropout rate. This is no disrespect to people but when they are aged 16, 17 or 18 years and are asked what they are going to do for the rest of their lives, it is a difficult question to answer. At that stage people should get a flavour of these vocational types of professions such as nursing, teaching and social work and an understanding of what they are going into as opposed to just getting the points, going into the profession, getting the job and then realising after two years that it is not for them. A career guidance path could be used. Have there been talks about that? It is a demanding and rewarding profession and, as with any profession, certain people are fit for it. That, coupled with supports, could alleviate the pressure and dropout rates. What supports are in place for people who are starting in the profession to reach the five-year point where they feel confident and able to deal with their role?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** I will work backwards on those questions. With regard to getting into college, by and large, many people do a primary degree. Social science was the traditional one, but it could be in social care or in a few allied courses. Then they do a masters in social work. There is also a four-year degree in Trinity College Dublin and University College Cork where people go straight through. The degree and the masters are similar to many professions. One must be interviewed to get a place on any of those courses. There have always been interviews to get into social work courses because the Deputy is correct that social work is not for everybody. The interview is part of the process to help the course providers decide who is more suitable.

On the issue of panels, the public service way of recruiting appears to be a very intricate system of national recruitment with panels and a very long, long way of getting from application-----

**Deputy Tom Neville:** If I can interject, does Ms McGuirk know how many steps it takes from the start of the recruitment process to the end?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** My understanding is they apply through Tusla Recruit.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** The Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care was given a breakdown of the steps a psychiatric nurse goes through to get hired. I think there were 26 or 27. Ms McGuirk may not have that information.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** I spoke to several young graduates employed in Tusla and my understanding is many of them are employed by agencies. There is rolling recruitment for Tusla. If the Deputy goes onto its website he will see it is always looking for social workers. I presume when it has sufficient numbers it holds interview panels. Then it gives out expressions of inter-

est.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** My question, and Ms McGuirk may not be able to answer it, is about the back end, the decision making on vetting candidates. How many stakeholders does that CV have to go to before Tusla decides who it is going to interview? After the interview process who decides whether a person will be hired? How many internal steps are there?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** Tusla Recruit is the only stakeholder other than Garda vetting.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** Internally in Tusla how many steps does a candidate have to take?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** I do not know.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** That has an effect.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** I do not think it is anything like the number the Deputy has mentioned for the psychiatric personnel but there would be Garda vetting and checking of references, all that kind of thing. My concern would be that in such a shortage it seems to take a long time to get the person from interview, and being placed on a panel, to the job.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** That is why I was asking about the internal process because that is probably stretching it.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** It seems to be the way public service is done, people are put on panels, there are expressions of interest and the candidates do not know how many ahead of them have put in an expression of interest for the post or area that they want to go to. It strikes me as a very convoluted way of doing things. In the past there were more local ways of recruiting but to do things in any large national way seems to take a long time.

In respect of supervision, Tusla has increased the number of team leaders and the team leader is the immediate supervisor of the social worker. A team leader will have between four and six social workers to supervise. That becomes difficult if, for example, three people leave that team of six because there are three unallocated caseloads that are the responsibility of that team leader. The leader is trying to plug the gaps when the foster carer telephones or the child runs away from the placement, or a case has to return to court. The support is then diluted because it is more difficult for the leader to support the team when he or she is overwhelmed with work. How to support those first line supervisors to do that job needs to be addressed so that the young social worker is encouraged to stay and gain experience.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** There are variations around the country, not all teams would be the same or have the same workload.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** Mr. McCarthy may not have these figures but would some of the panels and expressions of interest around the country be oversubscribed?

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** Yes, some of the developments preceded Tusla. One was the centralisation of recruitment. There was a time up to recently when there were multiple national panels, and with the emergence of Tusla Recruit there is the possibility of having regional panels and maybe bespoke panels. It would be really helpful if the recruitment could return to being done locally because as it stands the local manager does not have any say in who comes to work with him or her.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** Is it HR that makes all the decisions?

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** Tusla Recruit is a welcome development. It can manage all the recruitment process but it could maybe let that happen more locally.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** I worked in recruitment in the private sector and in the companies I worked with there would be HR and a line manager. It was not one or the other. That kept it local.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** If an organisation is recruiting nationally-----

**Deputy Tom Neville:** This was done in a national format through a central database but the interview would take place with the hiring manager and the HR manager and both would decide on who to hire. Mr. McCarthy is telling me that one central function will make a decision on the hiring and that the line manager does not have a say in that.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** That would be the trend but there are efforts to change it and the sooner recruitment goes back to being local, the better. On recruitment, the previous speaker mentioned CPL, private agencies. That needs to be considered because it is another stress for social workers. I do not believe that most from CPL do not intend, or would not like, to stay with Tusla. That is how they enter into it.

**Chairman:** Let us not get into specifics please. There are plenty of firms involved in the process. Does Mr. McCarthy understand my point?

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** Sorry, there are yes, the recruitment company.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** They are publicly tendered so it is a matter of public record, with all due respect.

**Chairman:** We will let Mr. McCarthy respond to the point.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** Someone might come in to work with Tusla through a recruitment agency and would like to stay on permanently and then has to go onto panels and that process might take a-----

**Deputy Tom Neville:** There is no conversion contract.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** No there is not. Even while they are on a contract with the private agency they do not have the same entitlements, sick benefit, pension contributions-----

**Deputy Tom Neville:** They are on contract.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** That could be examined quite easily and suggestions are made in the full submissions.

**Deputy Tom Neville:** What often happens in the private sector is that if a person is on a contract with an agency and does six or 12 months there is a clause to the effect that the company can buy the contractor from the contracting company and make the person permanent.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** It would be good if there was more thought given to temporary contracts with the agency. That used to be the case. When we talk about recruitment and retention of child protection workers we are talking about the team leaders and the principal social workers as well because they are central to the delivery of a service. There is an increased difficulty in maintaining them for reasons similar to those causing the exodus of social workers.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I think it gives us everything we need. They say they met recently with Jim Gibson from Tusla. Did they present this document to Tusla? If so what was its reaction?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** We meet three to four times a year. It is difficult to get time for all the meetings. The IASW is a voluntary board. As chairperson I work in a completely voluntary capacity. I cannot get to all the meetings or meet all the people who would like to meet us, which is encouraging.

We see Tusla as extremely important because it is one of the largest employers of social workers in the country. We meet it two or three times a year. Our aim has always been three to four but we do not quite make it. Our meetings are productive. There is a lot of common ground. Somehow what very senior management aspires to gets lost in translation on the ground. There are all sorts of reasons for that. One is the insufficient number of social workers. It is a fact that there are more posts in all forms of social work than there are social workers. Therefore, people will leave the most difficult work to go do something that they see as being a little easier.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** A lot of the submission is common sense. If I were Tusla and watching this debate then I would pick up the phone and have a chat with the association as soon as possible in order to address some of these issues. We have raised the issue of providing skilled administrative assistance with the Minister and she said she would look into the matter. Providing such assistance makes sense. We are not re-inventing the wheel here. Following this meeting, perhaps the committee should take the initiative and invite Tusla here to ask its officials whether they have considered any of these options.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** Many suggestions have been made and colleagues around the country have submitted more suggestions. There is no shortage of suggestions on what needs to be done to maintain staff. The obvious ones are a good working environment and provide support staff, including administrative staff. The key point must be that the workforce is the most valuable resource one has when delivering a service. It is important to note that not all social workers within Tusla are leaving. The turnover rate of staff is more specific to this cohort of people who work on the front line of child protection and family welfare. There have been a lot of good developments happening in Tusla, such as preventative work and the involvement of practitioners in research but there is one key question, namely, who is going to do it? Retaining what one already has and building supports in order that people who come in will want to stay is key. If one can stop the exodus of so many social workers, then one can build up one's cohort bit by bit and people will be attracted to the work. That is why we need to be cautious when we talk about recruitment and recruiting more social workers. There is an assumption that all childcare leaders or workers will want to become child protection social workers. Maybe they would if the role was defined in a different way and they had the capacity to do all aspects of the work that they want to do.

There is a danger if one follows the example in England where one has a quick course to convert people from certain professions into child protection because that option is not working there. We must also be careful not to dumb down the profession. Many other professions would not accept conversations of having a quick entry and dumbing down the profession. Also, there is a danger of reducing social work to tasks, and the situation whereby the nice tasks are taken away from social workers and given to someone else, while leaving the social workers with the heavy lifting, must be avoided. I wish to respond to the point made about access to fostering. Other people can do access. If one talks about the social worker having statutory

responsibility, then access can be a very important part of that, as is building up a relationship with the child, the family and the foster family.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** The retention of staff is an important issue not only for Tusla as an organisation but particularly for children. Mr. McCarthy hit the nail on the head with his comments. There are children and families who have fantastic relationships with social workers and some of those relationships have continued after the children left care. Children are key and we need to retain the quality, skilled staff we have. The organisation needs to do stuff in terms of staff well-being because social work is a hard and emotional job. I sometimes wonder how social workers unwind when they return to their family environments because social work is hard.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** The Deputy has made a very good point. Social work is not for everybody.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Yes.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** Social work requires very emotionally resilient people. I mean people who are able to experience the worst because the lives some of our children have are very traumatic. A social worker in this sector must experience that, yet go home to his or her own children or family. That is why I say that social work is not for everybody.

In terms of additional courses, Institute of Technology Sligo has provided a course this year and hopes to get accreditation from CORU, and Maynooth University will provide a course from next September. One should remember that social work was the first of the allied health or social care professions to be regulated. Social care is a regulated profession and a protected title. The courses that qualify people to use the protected title must fulfil CORU's remit for what constitutes a good course. We have heard and know that CORU are not happy with the courses in England where social workers are being qualified to work in a child welfare sector only. Social work, typically, is a broad qualification. One does not qualify a lawyer just to work in family law. One qualifies people to be a lawyer and then they will get experience and specialise in an area, which is the same with doctors and everybody so it is important to keep that.

**Chairman:** What is the context of the concern in the UK?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** It is that the courses do not receive the breadth of education and experience. Typically, our social workers spend six months in placement. When one hears people talk about doing these courses where people spend part of their time working, that is the professional social work course anyway. People do two long placements of three months each with one placement in a sector such as probation or Tusla child welfare and the other placement in a different sector such as mental health, medical social work or whatever. Therefore, at the end one has a person who has trained in and experienced a couple of areas of social work. He or she can make a decision about what they might like to do in terms of their work but they do so from a broad educational and knowledgeable base. By contrast, the aim of the courses in England seems to be to produce people to work just in this sector.

**Chairman:** I understand that but why is that an issue for us? There might be a concern in the UK. That is fine as people can have a concern. What is the context in terms of Ireland?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** CORU may not register these people. I mean people may not be qualify to be registered with CORU.

**Chairman:** Has CORU indicated that is its intention? Is it just based upon the experience in the UK?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** Somebody from the UK would have to give all of their documentation to CORU on all of the courses he or she has done to earn a degree.

**Chairman:** Yes, of course.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** We have a broad education. If the education is purely just child welfare then a person will not have all of the other pieces that would secure him or her registration.

**Chairman:** That is fair enough as a statement. I am trying to understand why Ms McGuirk would make the assessment that CORU might not accept someone as a social worker who has come from the UK with a narrow sphere of educational expertise or qualification in a specific area. Has CORU made overtures that there will be a problem?

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** The IASW meets CORU on an annual basis. CORU would be concerned to make sure that any courses, going forward, are absolutely robust and fulfil the criteria in order that the graduates from those courses are able to be registered, as social workers, under the current system.

**Chairman:** As a committee, we are operating under the assumption that in order to meet the annual demand for social workers, we would have to increase the number of educational facilities and pathways to the qualification of social workers, whether it be part-time or, potentially, long distance modular learning. All of these issues can be worked out in every profession, of which I am aware. There will always be an element of somebody learning on a part-time basis over a period of time, with the required nine-to-five full-time setting at the end of the process. This can be done by way of the universities, the institutes of technology or the new technical college-----

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** The Technological University Dublin.

**Chairman:** Yes, or anywhere else for that matter. I am sure it will feature heavily in any report or recommendations we, as a committee, will write.

For me, hearing that there is potential for the accrediting body to state, "No", that such a course is not good enough, is slightly concerning. That is why I would like to get to the bottom of why Ms McGuirk made that statement. I apologise for repeating the question, but she will understand why I question the assumption that the body may not provide accreditation for the course. It is key to our ability to meet demand. I am not sure whether this is the view of the accrediting body view or that of Ms McGuirk, but I would rather get social workers in the door with a narrow based qualification in the area or field within which they wish to work, rather than not have accreditation for the course and, therefore, not have that throughput of motivated individuals who want to move into a specific area of social work.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** I am not speaking for the schools, but certain criteria have to be met.

**Chairman:** That goes without saying.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** The last point the Chairman made needs more discussion about getting people qualified to move into a particular area of social work.

**Chairman:** I would have thought it was their choice. I am not sure it is something that

should be discussed by industry representatives. If people want to go work in it, let them work in it, as long as they are qualified to do so.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** The point I was going to make and which has been made is that unless working in that setting is manageable and people can stay in it, increasing the number coming into the profession will not make much of a difference. There is plenty of room where Tusla and the Department can enter into negotiations with the colleges and think creatively about all of the points mentioned by the committee, all of which is possible. The working environment and what needs to be done to keep people in, once they come through the door, however they come through it, are the key issues that cannot be forgotten.

**Chairman:** Nothing in our report will operate in a silo. For every recommendation, it will have to be stated, “to be considered in tandem with X, Y or Z”. There is no one single solution, whether it be terms and conditions, workload, or dealing with a supervisor with whom a person does not get on. At the end of the day, they are human beings; therefore, there will always be such issues. It might also involve circumstances outside our current thinking. Of course, there has to be a broad approach in dealing with this issue. We are not at cross-purposes.

**Ms Aine McGuirk:** In the past, in former iterations of Tusla, there were secondments to enable people to qualify when there were short shortages of social workers. There is scope in that regard. Many community welfare officers took the requisite courses and became social workers. They received some funding from their employer at the time to do so. These are not new. The Irish Foster Care Association also mentioned the idea of bursaries. Giving somebody a contract under which they have to work for the organisation for two or three years or whatever the appropriate period is is different from having a course and stating one is going to qualify as a social worker but can only work in Tusla. The association would not be in favour of having such a course.

**Mr. Joe McCarthy:** There is the long-standing issue of recruitment and retention, not just in Tusla. Some 15 years ago the position was the same. I was sent to Chicago once by the then Southern Health Board to recruit social workers. Therefore, this is not something new. Around that time, in certain areas, it granted two-year bursaries to students to take a master’s degree course. They then stayed on in Tusla for a year. Interestingly, a lot of those who received that support remained in Tusla. If one invests in and encourages a student and there is a welcoming and manageable environment, people will stay. Exit interviews have been mentioned. I am not aware that such interviews are carried out routinely, but the reasons the majority leave are known. The social workers *in situ* who would love to continue working in the area of child protection and family welfare could indicate very clearly what needs to be done.

**Chairman:** On behalf of the committee, I thank the delegates for their presentation and dealing with members’ questions in such a comprehensive way. On Wednesday, 10 April, the committee will meet representatives of the Technological Higher Education Association and the school of business and social sciences in IT Sligo to continue its consideration of the topic of the recruitment and retention of social workers.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.37 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 10 April 2019.