

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

Dé Máirt, 28 Bealtaine 2019

Tuesday, 28 May 2019

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Denise Mitchell,	Fintan Warfield.
Tom Neville.*	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Senators Joan Freeman and Catherine Noone.

Teachta / Deputy Alan Farrell sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 1.15 p.m.

Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: The purpose of today's meeting is to meet with representatives of Fórsa and to continue the joint committee's consideration of the topic of the recruitment and retention of social workers.

I welcome Mr. Eamonn Donnelly, head of the health and welfare division of Fórsa, and Mr. Bernard Cantillon, social worker at Tusla.

Before we commence, in accordance with procedure I am required to draw the attention of attendees 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 joint committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to 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 asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person 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 Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode as they may interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for parliamentary reporters to report the meeting. Phones also adversely affect television and web streaming coverage.

I advise witnesses that any submission or opening statements made to the joint committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting. After their presentations there will be questions from members of the committee.

I invite Mr. Donnelly to make his opening statement.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to present to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs in its capacity as the trade union representing social workers in Ireland's public sector. The issue which generated this invitation to attend the meeting and to make a written submission is the matter of the recruitment and retention of social workers. In the published Tusla business plan 2017 there were 1,472.75 whole-time equivalent, WTE, social work posts recorded. Of those WTE posts, 8% were vacant, generating 4,282 cases awaiting social worker allocation. Of the whole-time equivalent posts, 8% were vacant, generating 4,282 cases awaiting social worker allocation, 654 of which were deemed high priority. Based on an accepted norm of a running caseload of 15 cases per social worker, the deficit identified amounted to a minimum of 285 whole-time equivalent social workers. This situation has not improved in the intervening period. We have sent, as an appendix to this statement, a submission which was made to Fórsa by the union's social work professional committee within Tusla which outlines the views directly held by social workers regarding reasons for difficulty in retention of social workers. Common themes outlined directly by social workers include child protection work having become increasingly complex and more demanding, which places

increased levels of stress on individual social workers, including the younger cohort of social workers who enter the system, many of whom by that stage do not yet carry high-demand family responsibilities. As social workers become more experienced, there is a correlation between work demands and increased family pressures. An overwhelming percentage of social workers are female and find it increasingly difficult to achieve the level of work-life balance to cope with these added pressures. In addition, given the percentage of female employees in social work, it is inevitable that there will be large tranches of both maternity and parental leave. While this is, of course, a most welcome condition of employment, the problem arises when the replacement and backfilling strategies are both cumbersome and unproductive. This is clearly evidenced by the number of unallocated cases, previously cited.

Many young social workers who enter into the workforce are immediately challenged by the demanding nature of the post of child protection social worker. Typically, these would be college graduates in the early to mid-20s age range, who opt to travel, as an example, at a time in life when there is a better opportunity to do so. Unlike nursing or medicine, there is no real requirement to emigrate as far as Australia to gain experience in the area of career development. The proximity of the NHS in the UK affords an opportunity for short-term emigration without too much upheaval to gain experience in the universally accessible and more attractive health and social care system.

The career pathway for social workers has not been examined for more than 15 years, in spite of the much-changed environment and landscape of child protection in that time. Innovative ways need to be found to provide a gateway for college entrants to choose social work as a profession. On entry into the workforce, this gateway must be developed into a pathway whereby social workers can see the prospect of career progression as their levels of experience grow. Automatic advancement from basic grade to senior grade social worker based on protocols and checkpoints would provide a clear vision of career development at little or no cost to the State as those levels of posts already exist in the system. In addition, having garnered years of experience, it is not uncommon for a social worker to excel in a particular area of expertise. The State, therefore, would greatly benefit from converting this specialist expertise into a model of advanced practitioner working. To complete the journey, this expertise and experience can be of further benefit if imported into posts which have responsibility for service planning and delivery.

Due to the cumbersome nature of the recruitment processes, a market has been created for the use of agency staff. Therefore, a young social worker can choose to register with an agency and be assigned to work in a particular area. This has potential for a twofold negative on the system in that, first, the agency social worker is not committed to a durable post and is not tied down to it and, second, working conditions are much looser in areas such as pension contributions and so on. In Ireland, there is an increasing blame culture on the rise. Tusla, as an institution, has been a headline victim of this culture in recent years. It is not unusual to hear calls to have Tusla disbanded in the wake of a particular child protection controversy. This undoubtedly places a stigma upon the workforce at all levels, most notably upon the social worker who is at the very centre of child protection work.

By their nature, a high percentage of child protection and social work issues in society are spread throughout urban areas. The associated costs of living in urban areas, which are reaching crisis point in this country, are restricting the attraction of social work as a career of choice. A formalised exit interview system must be used to analyse properly the reasons that such a relatively high percentage of social workers choose to leave Tusla. Additionally, the change

management culture in a relatively new organisation like Tusla can often be driven as a priority reaction to negative media and public comment. It is often non-inclusive and creates additional demands on social workers without any sharing of a common vision.

The committee's invitation to this meeting also asked for real-life experiences of social workers. I have a short anonymous statement from a social worker who is a couple of years in the system. The social worker is of the type or generation close to entry to the workforce whom I have spoken about. I can read the statement and forward it to the committee, if necessary.

Chairman: I do not have a problem with that, Mr. Donnelly, provided you ensure that it is anonymous.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: It is short but it will give the committee an insight. If there are any questions, Mr. Cantillon has the working experience to be able to deal with them.

From having worked as a child protection social worker in the past number of years, there are several issues that I believe have contributed to the difficulties that social workers face on a day-to-day basis. There has been a great deal of change in the past 24 months with regard to the restructuring of the child protection sector within Tusla. Married with this, there has been a change with our approach to working with children and families to the Signs of Safety framework. Below are prevalent issues for social workers.

The threshold of risk varies in different offices and counties. Therefore, assessments and decisions vary depending on teams. This makes it difficult when receiving cases previously unknown to social work involvement and for plans being put in place with families.

The nature of child protection services presents difficulties. We need evidence before an action or plan is put in place. Therefore, preventative intervention is lost and social workers are working with families through risk management as opposed to a supportive approach to bring about long-term positive change. This creates families understandably putting blocks to social work intervention.

There is no clear guidance on procedures on founded or unfounded allegations for social workers. Safety planning is often not completed with families where allegations are retracted, often through coercion. This is despite concerns remaining for the children and families due to evidence no longer having weight because of retraction.

The fast-paced nature of child protection work and high caseloads block social workers from completing therapeutic direct work with families and children, resulting in social workers relying on outside services to undertake work that guides our assessment. This can be a costly and time-consuming process.

Working with children and families takes time as does relationship building and meaningful engagement from social workers and families. Given the availability of social workers this is not always achievable, as mentioned, due to high caseloads.

Staff retention is an issue within Tusla at present. Therefore, staff turnover frequently results in teams being unstable and inconsistent. Often this leaves teams low on numbers resulting in social workers taking on colleagues' cases as well as their own. It proves difficult when emergencies occur with families with whom social workers are not familiar especially regarding safety planning and interventions. Although Children First guidelines aim to put statutory obligations on professionals and members of the public to identify and report child

protection concerns, in practice this is still a major difficulty facing social workers on a day-to-day basis. There appears to be a lack of consequences for those not upholding their statutory obligations.

As noted, interventions are based on concerns being evidenced. Drug use and alcoholism are only detected through positive screening or by client disclosure. My experience is that clients are not often open about their addiction and therefore social workers rely on co-operation of general practitioners or screenings carried out by addiction services to carry out drug screenings. However, there is major difficulty at present with GPs refusing to undertake such screenings, therefore causing difficulties to social workers in identifying substance misuse and addressing the risk that it poses to children. There is no statutory obligation or guidance for GPs to work with social workers in place with regard to urine analysis.

The fostering department is currently having major difficulty with sourcing and keeping appropriate foster carers. Foster carers have reported to social workers under the child protection theme to the effect that they believe they have not received adequate training or preparation to care for children who often present with high needs and behaviours. Such needs are difficult for inexperienced carers to manage. This lack of training and support often results in placement breakdowns. This is problematic for children who have come into the care system, often experiencing instability or inconsistent care. They may continue to experience this in the care of Tusla. Furthermore as a social worker in child protection much of my work with children in care involves supporting the foster carers, but this is not my role. The fostering department is extremely busy at present and does not appear available to provider carers with the day-to-day support that foster carers require, resulting in the child's social worker carrying out this work. Furthermore, I have concerns regarding the efficiency of foster care assessments being carried out since I have had significant concerns regarding foster carers with whom vulnerable children are placed. While I can appreciate that foster placements are scarce I would have concerns regarding foster carers being passed by committees but who are not able to meet the emotional needs of children. Furthermore, there does not appear to be a functioning placement matching process in place to identify appropriate placement matches for children to foster carers and it is seen as trial and error. Finally there is a significant backlog of children-in-care cases transferring from child protection to children-in-care teams due to understaffing in the children-in-care teams. This results in social workers and the child protection team holding a children-in-care caseload as well as child protection.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to make this statement. In addition to the appendix document forwarded it can be taken as a written submission from Fórsa on the issue.

Chairman: Thank you very much Mr. Donnelly. Mr. Cantillon, do you wish to highlight anything at this stage?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: I will focus on the difficulties with placements and how they impact on the work of individual social workers. In the Dublin region there is a particular difficulty in sourcing foster care placements for children, which has led to placements being sourced through private agencies down the country. Social workers are finding placements for children from the Dublin region in Wexford, Kilkenny, Munster and even Donegal. Responsibility for each case remains with the social worker in Dublin, despite the child being placed in Donegal or Wexford, etc. The social worker has to visit the young person involved while their caseload remains the same as if the child had been placed in Dublin. Social workers from Dublin are travelling across the country to meet the children for whom they are responsible but this is not

reflected in a reduction in their caseload, even though these visits may wipe out an entire day or even more than that. This places particular difficulties on social workers in Dublin and many colleagues have told me they cannot do it any more. Their work day begins early in the morning when they have to travel to meet young people in Donegal, Cavan or Westmeath; I had to go to Wexford and across the midlands under the caseload I had to manage. One ends up spending half a day for a short meeting with a young person's school and yet one has all the other cases to deal with as well, which makes it particularly difficult for social workers.

The children-in-care teams manage caseloads of children who are in foster care but there are difficulties in the recruitment of social workers, and there are not enough of them. When a child protection concern comes in and a child is identified as needing to go into care, the duty or child protection team is meant to take responsibility almost instantaneously but there are no social workers to do that so the children have to remain in the caseload of the social workers at the duty end of the house. Those workers carry huge responsibility for assessing the cases coming in and carrying those cases when they should be on another team. Significant stress and pressure are being put on individual social workers to manage this as a result of the difficulty in recruiting social workers.

Other areas of social work also have high caseloads but those in child protection are unmanageable because of the lack of staff. In May and June every year, the local social work departments speak with the new university graduates and everybody who wants to come into Tusla is recruited at that point. By September or October, this pool of people has dried up and another cohort of experienced social workers have left, while those who started in May or June begin to leave. By Christmas there is usually nobody available to fill vacancies and we have to wait until the following June or July to fill them from the new round of graduates. The cycle is exhausting for social workers because they have to carry the burden of all the additional cases, which are unallocated at that stage.

Chairman: A couple of questions arise from Mr. Donnelly's opening statement. He referred to the advance practitioner model. I have done a bit of reading on it, but we are only just back from the election so I am still trying to get back into the swing of things, as I am sure the witnesses can imagine. What are the benefits and practicalities of introducing something along the lines of the advanced practitioner model?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: This was already examined in great detail 15 years ago; it is a recommended model that everybody accepts but it just never happened. The reason it is of benefit is that one can identify particular areas of critical need and match them up with particular areas of experience and expertise. They can be matched up. That is the model. I always say that if one wants to attract people into a career, one first has to make it attractive but once that gateway is opened, one needs to create a pathway. Nobody is going to stay in a career that has no pathway. Part of that pathway is advancing to a more senior level but a critical part is for someone to be able to say they have developed a range of experiences, to know what he or she is good at, what their area of expertise is, and that there is a societal need to deliver it. That is the model and that is where the best is extracted from people. Mr. Cantillon might be able to advance on that but that is my concept of it.

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: In terms of the advanced practitioner role, there is a greater responsibility to go to court and to fulfil statutory needs within child protection social work than in other areas of social work. There is a huge amount of responsibility and the gaze of the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, on the work of both individual social workers and teams, is almost continuous. Experienced social workers have left to go to other areas of

social work, and the reality on the ground is that the overwhelming majority of social workers in child protection teams, particularly in the Dublin area, only have a few years of experience. The more experienced workers have either left or moved down the country. We end up in a situation where the team's experience might only be a few years old; they do not have the experience of decades that one would hope for across a functioning team that is nurturing its workers as they move through it. It is about capturing the experience one gains from having worked in a field for a long time and rewarding people for their expertise, saying we recognise that expertise by creating a grade which reflects the level of expertise and value a person brings to a team. Senior roles have been created in other areas of social work which have allowed people to advance from their grades into other areas without going through a separate recruitment process. That makes those other roles in social work more attractive to people, as well as the fact that they carry less responsibility and are not under a constant public gaze. Social workers welcome the work of HIQA in identifying flaws and failures in the system, but we sometimes feel we are being assessed in a situation where we do not have the resources to solve problems, because we do not have the staff coming in and are not able to retain the expertise that would allow us to produce or provide the best service we possibly could.

Chairman: Mr. Donnelly referenced the pathway a couple of times saying it would benefit the system, but he also mentioned that it would have little or no cost to the State. Is that in the scheme of things or is he being literal?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: Generally, the people we hold onto go from basic to senior during their careers through longevity anyway. Appointment panels of staff are created all over the country and there is movement from one county to the next and so on. There are gaps in creating the panels and there are recruitment problems in terms of the resources to set all of these things up. A previous report recommended that it would be better if people could advance from basic to senior grade, subject, of course, to criteria checkpoints and quality control checkpoints. That would develop a continuity in the area, rather than this swamp that is caused by people trying to access promotion and competing in other counties, getting jobs in other counties and then looking to get back home, and so on. We see that it would be a better model.

Chairman: Are there differentiating scales in salary?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: The basic rate comes in----

Chairman: Would it change from region to region or is it----

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: No. It is uniform.

Chairman: I misunderstood Mr. Donnelly. I understand. One of the issues that arose when we discussed the education of social workers coming through the system was trying to attract people from other sectors to come into the industry. We discussed, in particular, the blended learning approach and bringing people in to try to attract them to the sector. As an organisation or as a social worker, would Mr. Donnelly have any concerns or issue in respect of that?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: The only concern I would have is that if colleagues are brought through some sort of training scheme that they are qualified to the same level of expectation as those of us who are already in the profession. We do not want to create a type of social worker who is less qualified or a situation where there would be a type of social worker who is a child protection social worker but is not qualified to work as a social worker. There is a particular level of expertise and training which goes in to creating a social worker. We do not want to

create a separate type of social worker who is not at the level to which the rest of us are trained.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: If I may say something that is not provocative but would give food for thought, almost all people who choose social work as a profession have a good social conscience. They want to do good things.

Chairman: Of course.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: They want to advocate on behalf of the disadvantaged in society. In their younger years they sometimes come in with an expectation that they will be able to make a difference straight away but they get choked in regulation. It can seem as if the roof is falling in because of the pressures and it drives them away from the profession. When we educate people to be social workers it needs to be a clear part of the education curriculum that this is a tough station and that it is not just about doing well for the community. I do not mean to be flippant about that. It is very important.

Chairman: I agree. I thank Mr. Donnelly for that.

The only other area I would like to touch upon is that given the nature of the role and the number of whole-time equivalent personnel who are not present and the ever-increasing difficulties in recruiting them, there has to be pressures from a practical perspective on recent graduates - trainees, so to speak - coming through the system. It has been referenced on a couple of occasions by previous witnesses before the committee. If the witnesses have examples it might provide information to the committee that we would consider but how would that impact on the longevity of a person coming into a role if they are swamped? We were given evidence, and Mr. Cantillon referenced it, regarding individuals driving all over the country to serve their client base - the children in question - and the difficulties that presents. The evidence provided to us was that they were not being paid an allowance for that. I believe the previous arrangement whereby the supervising social worker would reimburse them was frowned upon, discontinued or something like that. That presents a trainee with difficulties. Mr. Cantillon might like to touch upon those issues.

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: One of the difficulties is that there seemed to be different arrangements in departments across the different areas within the city and across the country. In some areas, social workers are told there is an expectation that they would reduce their mileage as a mechanism to save money.

On mileage and other areas, staff are told they cannot use a taxi, for example, to transport a young person because it costs money. All these factors add to the difficulty of doing the job. One ends with circumstances in which staff sometimes feel they have responsibility to visit a young person but cannot use the easiest mechanism to get to the placement while doing all the work they are expected to do. A resource issue on a wider level creates a lot of difficulty.

In some parts of Tusla, social workers end up doing a lot of administration work and carrying out many roles that are actually social care roles. We end up in circumstances in which, because there is a lack of social care workers, whose grade and profession is separate from that of social worker, social workers end up taking responsibility for the supervision and facilitation of family access and contact. This adds to the stress attached to the social worker role. Social workers are now not just responsible for managing the case and the care planning; they are also responsible for bringing children to placements and collecting them afterwards. The social worker might have to collect a child placed in Wexford, for example, bring that child to

Dublin to see his or her parents and then drive him or her back to Wexford afterwards. In essence, one is making four trips in the day. One must, therefore, go up and down twice to make sure the young person sees his or her family. We want the children to see their families, which is important, but because we do not have the support staff to help us carry out the functions, social workers end up feeling they have to do everything. In addition, a lack of administrative staff in many departments has led to circumstances in which social workers are doing practically all their own filing. In many offices, there is no support to help with filing because there are not enough administration staff. I realise there is a public perception that there are too many administrative staff in the HSE and Tusla but the experience of social workers on the ground is that this is not true. We need the support of our colleagues in administration. We just need more of them.

Chairman: As a matter of interest, does Mr. Donnelly know the administrative staff whole-time equivalent in Tusla?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: No, but the figure for administrative staff generally runs at about 11%.

Chairman: It just interests me.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: It would not be greatly different from the HSE figure. The scale of our model was based on the previous one.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I thank the delegates for their presentation today. How many social workers are members of the union?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: I could not give the Deputy an exact figure but we are running at approximately 45%.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: With regard to contact with the union, do many ring up about their working environment and express concern?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: We have representatives on the ground who field many of those queries. We work through a professional committee. Mr. Cantillon is familiar with that committee. We regularly meet the professional committee, which feeds all this stuff. It is a huge network. The professional committee within Tusla gathered this type of information for us. It was not a question of just sitting down and writing an opinion piece. This is based on stuff we gather regularly.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The witnesses gave us an appendix. There are parts of it that-----

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: That is what the group put together.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The group put it together collectively. I am not saying it was Mr. Donnelly. Forty-nine social worker posts are in Dublin north east. Is that a fact?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: The figures are based census reports.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: There are 104 vacant posts in that region of Dublin. Is that correct?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: Tusla is structured such that it has four regions. Dublin north east encompasses practically all the north side of Dublin, Louth, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I am aware of that. I know the region. I refer to the fact that there are 104 vacant posts in the region.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: At the time of the census from which that information was taken, that was the case and it has not changed dramatically since. The pace has not quickened.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: If there are 104 vacant posts, how many cases do social workers in the region have?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: It is currently running at approximately 15 live cases per social worker. That is the running tally of cases. That amounts to 1,560 cases, by my arithmetic.

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: While there was a recent commitment from Tusla that it would be 15 cases per social worker, that has not been adhered to in all cases and some social workers are carrying higher caseloads.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: There are social workers carrying higher caseloads-----

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: Yes but the reality is that there is a lack of social workers on the ground.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: What is the highest caseload being carried by a social worker of which the witnesses are aware?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: I was aware of a social worker carrying 50 cases but that was extremely unusual. I work in an emergency setting at the moment but I worked previously in a children-in-care role and carried just over 20 cases which was beyond-----

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: Obviously the complexity of cases varies considerably but it is generally accepted that, as a general rule of thumb, 15 is as high as it should get.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: What is the typical caseload in other countries? In comparison to the UK, for example, is 15 the average?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: I am not sure. I do not have figures for the UK.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Are any comparisons being drawn with other countries?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: In the UK, social work is structured slightly differently. It is often part of a community care department. Social work in the UK can be structured on the basis of child protection or on the basis of a more generic social work department for a county, with the latter encompassing child protection as well elder abuse and many other areas.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: I was told that we had five minutes for our introductory remarks so I did not want to overload the committee with statistics but we have a far lower number of social workers *per capita* than comparator countries. We can forward data on that to the Deputy. Tusla probably has data on that as well.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I have a personal interest in this. I know that the turnover of social workers, particularly in the region to which we are referring, is high, which has negative knock-on effects on the children in care. As the witnesses will be aware, such children build relationships with social workers who then move on. There are knock-on effects when new social workers are constantly coming into the system. There are cases of children in the care system for relatively short periods who are on their ninth social worker. That in itself has a negative

effect on them. Why are social workers constantly being lost?

The witnesses said that social workers typically have 15 live cases. What is that like for social workers on a day-to-day basis? What is expected of them?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: In an ideal situation, social workers would just have 15 cases. In terms of children-in-care caseloads, they are expected to facilitate the care planning for these young people. They have to meet the children or young people and try to work on what they want and on their wishes. They must also explain to them why they are in care and why what is happening in their lives is happening. Children always have questions as to why they are in care, why they are not living with their mum and dad and so on. If there are court proceedings taking place, social workers are expected to write and compile court reports, as well as to link in with other professionals and solicit reports from them on what is happening for the young person involved. This might include getting reports from speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, general practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists and others. Social workers are constantly having conversations and holding meetings with other professionals. The social workers travel to those meetings, chair them and bring everyone together. They meet families to look at supports in the wider family. We call such meetings family welfare conferences. While a meeting might take an hour, days or weeks of planning can go into it. The social workers will have had to meet individual relatives to explain why the process is taking place and how they can be part of it. They must allow these relatives time to think about what they can bring to the meeting because we do not want people coming to the meeting and turning to the social worker to ask what they are going to do. It is about helping people to see what they can bring to the table to help their relative who is experiencing-----

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: The Deputy raises a very interesting point about building relationships with what some people call the clientele, although that is not a word I like. I refer to them as people in society whom we are assisting. There would be far less movement under the model we suggested with regard to advancement. It is not just that we are losing social workers but that social workers hop around from one place to another. That compromises the building of relationships to which the Deputy refers.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: We see some fantastic social workers moving on to work in the health professions. Why is that sector more attractive? That is the question I am trying to get the witnesses to address. Why do social workers move on from child protection in particular? We admit that it is a very difficult role. Excellent social workers are moving on to other Departments. Why is the grass greener on the other side?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: One big aspect of the answer to that question is blame culture. I am not referring to social workers only but to all staff in Tusla. It is not possible to prevent child protection issues from arising. We cannot do that but every time there is controversy someone will look for a scapegoat and it comes back to the organisation, where there is a culture of blame. It is very difficult to work at the epicentre of that. The health service offers different options, such as the opportunity to work in primary care as part of a multidisciplinary team with speech and language therapists and so on where one has the opportunity to help in a different way. These are attractive options.

Chairman: What supports does Tusla provide for the front-line staff arising from such controversial public events, which are, unfortunately, a regular occurrence?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: This could be a short answer.

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: When reports are about to issue on events that will attract significant public attention and cause the public to be pretty appalled, management sends an email informing staff that such attention is likely to arise. However, no supports are really provided. I suppose one can talk to one's manager.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: The committee and the Chair appreciate that is a problem. That is the case and people need to go after it a bit.

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: Occasionally, something terrible will happen to somebody who has had an experience with the HSE and members of the public become aware of it. The reason people rarely post on online forums or other social media that they want the HSE abolished is that they see value in other areas of the organisation. They have had interactions with the HSE and are familiar with it. Most people have been to a hospital, visited a general practitioner or attended a consultant at some point in their lives. Tusla is, however, a bit of an unknown. Most people who have had a positive experience with Tusla do not broadcast it to their neighbours. That is understandable because people do not want to admit that there was a problem which caused Tusla to be involved in their lives. Often, people will view Tusla as a distant body which is engaged in something a little bit nefarious because they do not know what it is doing and they are not really sure what the role of a social worker is. There is a gap. Tusla does not provide much information, although, to be fair, it tries to tell the public what it does. When a scandal breaks, because the issues usually pertain to an individual, the standard response from Tusla tends to be that it cannot comment on individual cases. Many workers find that response dispiriting because the public is enraged about the matter but nobody seems to say this is the reason that the social workers in that case had to act in that manner. It is not really explained to the public that it can be difficult.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Mr. Cantillon raised a point about social workers supporting the foster parents as well. Should I take it that there is a shortage of link foster care social workers, the link workers who look after the families?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: There is a shortage of fostering social workers. I prefer the term fostering social workers because there has been some thought put into the idea that the link worker for foster carers would not need to be a social worker. The professional committee in Fórsa for social workers does not agree with that. We think it is important that people have a social worker. All areas of Tusla have a shortage of social workers. It is an ongoing difficulty. We end up with a situation where Tusla has become very reliant on private agencies and private fostering agencies in some areas to meet its need for foster placements. This is almost a result of the fact that it does not have enough social workers to conduct the assessments and to do the recruitment to bring foster carers in, but because there is a shortage of social workers and a high turnover of social workers in departments, it makes the private agencies more attractive to those who want to become a foster carer because they know they will always have an allocated social worker who will have a smaller caseload. I have heard that the private agencies' social workers have six or seven cases per social worker, whereas social workers who are working in fostering in Tusla are carrying a far higher caseload.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Is it the practice that the social workers are doing everything - dealing with the foster carers, work for the children and, in addition, are doing access work? Does Tusla have a shortage of access social workers, that is social workers to handle access for children? Are the staff numbers down to the bare bones?

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: We have a shortage of access social workers. I cannot speak for

every area in Tusla but certainly the experience of social workers in Dublin is that there are not enough social care workers on the teams to be able to facilitate access. Because social workers ultimately carry responsibility for the case and the legal responsibility for the case, when they return to court to explain what is happening in a case, it is almost impossible for them to say they could not facilitate the access with a young person and his or her parent or that it did not happen because they had other things to do. The courts obviously would find that unacceptable. Social workers do not want to cancel children's time with their families to do other things, so the social worker ends up doing it, but the stress of the job then becomes unbearable and social workers leave.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I thank Mr. Cantillon.

Deputy Tom Neville: I thank the witnesses for appearing before the joint committee. The Chairman of Tusla, Mr. Pat Rabbitte, came before the committee a number of weeks ago and we asked him a number of questions on the recruitment of social workers. The witnesses may not have the figures to hand but what percentage of social worker vacancies are outstanding? How many are backfills and how many are new positions? What is the turnover rate of social workers in the organisations? I do not expect the witnesses to have the figures, but would they have a general idea of them?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: I do not have the figures now, but we have access to them.

Deputy Tom Neville: Would Mr. Donnelly send them to the secretariat please?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: We will send them on. The picture we painted of 8% of whole-time equivalent posts being vacant has not changed dramatically. The recruitment processes have certainly not sped up. Therefore, there would be no reason for the picture to change.

Deputy Tom Neville: I am trying to ascertain how many of these are backfill vacancies and how many are new vacancies. Obviously, backfills are-----

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: That information is broken down in a document that is being-----

Deputy Tom Neville: That is correct. I want to return to Mr. Donnelly's point that when people go into the system, they find it too difficult and fall out of it again. The other tranche of jobs would be for new entrants who would not be in the system already. Has anybody from the HSE or any other entity come across to Tusla? Is it always one-way traffic from Tusla to-----

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: It is not always one-way traffic, but it is certainly the case that there are two lanes on one side of the road and one lane on the other.

Deputy Tom Neville: Has there been an examination of why people come from the HSE to Tusla, for argument's sake?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: It is usually on promotion.

Deputy Tom Neville: Okay, it is for those sectors. Mr. Donnelly has said that there is no exit interview whatsoever for anybody who is leaving.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: I am not saying there is no exit interview - I am saying there is no formulaic system of exit interviews. A good practitioner in a particular area might have a policy of finding out what happened in that area, but that is a kind of self-starter initiative. There is no formulaic system.

Deputy Tom Neville: The company does not have a HR policy that says there should be an exit interview for anyone who leaves.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: No.

Deputy Tom Neville: Okay.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: Therefore, by definition, there is no real analysis of the reason.

Deputy Tom Neville: All right. Has that ever been sought by the unions? Have the unions ever asked that of management?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: We have been seeking that. I do not want to create the impression that one gets a closed door when one approaches the people who run Tusla's HR department, because that does not happen. Other things can take over in an organisation like Tusla. There are well-intentioned things that we all mean to do, but we do not do.

Deputy Tom Neville: I will be straight with Mr. Donnelly. I worked in recruitment for eight years before I came in here. In my professional opinion, it is pretty easy to put in place a policy of having an exit interview when somebody leaves. An analysis can be gleaned from the responses to eight, ten or 12 specific questions on a sheet of paper. That would be my subjective opinion, given what I have come through. I understand what Mr. Donnelly has said about meetings and other things getting in the way. How often does the union meet management?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: That is a subjective question because meetings happen every day of the week in various areas. From a corporate point of view, we have regular monthly meetings with a HR agenda.

Deputy Tom Neville: Okay. That would be in relation to management. I do not want to get too much into the intricacies. I understand that information is sensitive. I am trying to understand the relationship between the unions and management. I have been hearing about these issues constantly over the past 12 or 18 months. Is it being communicated concurrently at the monthly meetings as a matter of priority that these processes need to change if the organisation is going to avoid haemorrhaging-----

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: I can cover that question by saying we are all clear about what the issues are. There has been no lack of identification of what the issues are. The HR function in Tusla is probably undernourished. Therefore, it finds itself firefighting much of the time rather than doing some of the things it means to do. Those things become intentions that it will get around to. There has been a degree of restructuring fatigue because a succession of chief executives has decided to set up directorates in certain ways. That puts a huge draw on HR departments. Sometimes it gets them talking about stuff when they would rather be talking about other stuff. I assure the Deputy that the working relationship between the union and the people who are charged with these tasks is good and healthy.

Deputy Tom Neville: That is good to hear. Does Mr. Donnelly believe there is too much focus on change management all the time without an actual focus on a demand-driven or customer-focused service that does not borrow from the private sector? Is he saying that because of the changes that are going on all the time, eyes have been taken off the ball, which is what is driving demand at the front end of the organisation?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: Some of that is driven by public sector commentary. If there is

slippage or controversy involving Tusla, everyone says that as a public organisation in the public service, it is not working to this standard, that standard and the other standard. I will give an example. Any time there is a scandal, an effort is immediately made to introduce a policy to react to it. That is not systematic planning. It is also an agency that is only in existence since 2014. It is relatively young. In an effort to try to cope with all the outside pressures the Deputy is probably right that there is a focus on saying that we must change the culture. One must keep one's nerve in this industry and say that we have a vision over five or ten years, we are going to work towards that and we are going to meet some lumps and bumps on the way. We have identified something here and we must ask ourselves why so many people are leaving. We must have a systematic approach to finding out why that is the case and make it a priority. It should not be that we need to suddenly write some policy because something went wrong and it was on the radio, and there is an element of that.

Deputy Tom Neville: Okay. What is the length of the recruitment process to hire a social worker?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: Recruitment in the public service is a bit of a monster because of the Garda checks, which are necessary, fields of competition, the egalitarian nature of the competition, the field one has to go to and so forth. It takes time. Due to the way the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Health would hold to an equivalence in terms of managing public service expenditure, it is always the case that when the vacancy arises there is a reaction to that, so a natural gap takes place. One could almost have constant panels for social workers the way things have gone in Tusla.

Deputy Tom Neville: That brings me to my next point about panels. We have been told that the panels are quite rigid in respect of CHO areas and that there is no flexibility or fluidity within panels. Is that correct?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: No, there is flexibility within panels. In fact, to return to my point about career progression, people might not jump from one area to another if there was a system of career progression. We are in a conversation with national recruitment services in the HSE about the problems recruitment is causing not just in social work, but everywhere. It is a cumbersome process.

Deputy Tom Neville: I know. However, I am trying to ascertain if there is anything within the recruitment process that can help us to attract social workers aside from matters regarding salary and there being more attractive positions abroad. Are there bottlenecks within the process whereby somebody will say: "I am not going to go through with this because it will take me 12 months to get this job and in the intervening time I will get a job somewhere else"?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: The bottlenecks are generally caused by seeking sanction.

Deputy Tom Neville: What does Mr. Donnelly mean?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: One has to seek sanction from the Departments. It is not just a matter of identifying a gap somewhere and advertising. It does not work like that. One must seek sanction. Then a Department will have to go to another Department to seek sanction and by the time that comes back the vacancy landscape has already changed. Sometimes one advertises. One creates a panel and one thinks it is fit for purpose but by the time people are called from that panel one has put one bubble out in the wallpaper and another one jumps up. There has to be a systematic look at recruitment to do it in a different way. Perhaps we might need

some outside expertise on that. I do not know.

Deputy Tom Neville: That is fair comment. Returning to the agencies, and I appreciate that Mr. Donnelly might not be able to answer this, is an exit interview conducted by the agencies who have staff who may fall out of the system?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: I do not know.

Deputy Tom Neville: Can we ascertain that information from agencies?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: If an agency worker comes in-----

Deputy Tom Neville: I worked in recruitment agencies. One would conduct an exit interview because as a recruiter the contractor has now dropped out so revenue-wise one's boss says: "The revenue is not coming so what happened? Please do an appraisal." If we had statistics regarding agency workers it would give us some type of anecdotal evidence we could use. That would be helpful.

Returning to the panels, I work on the mental health side as well and sit on a mental health committee. What has been conveyed to us is the fact that there is not enough local recruitment. It is more regional and national. Does Mr. Donnelly find the same issue with regard to Tusla, that it does not have local flexibility in the recruitment drives? Are there disparities between the number of social workers required in one part of the country *vis-à-vis* another part?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: My difficulty is that my colleague deals directly with Tusla and would be more familiar with the recruitment process there.

Deputy Tom Neville: That is fine. I appreciate that Mr. Donnelly cannot answer the question but if we can be provided with the information it would be fantastic.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: What I can say is that it has been union policy and it is the subject of discussion with the HSE to go back to regionalisation of recruitment for that reason.

Deputy Tom Neville: How long have the discussions been going on?

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: They started in recent months. The national recruitment system in the HSE is way beyond capacity.

Deputy Tom Neville: Okay.

Mr. Eamonn Donnelly: If we are moving to a health and social care system - Sláintecare - which is being devolved back out into regional integrated care organisations, recruitment will have to migrate with that. I have no doubt about that. I think that model should go into Tusla as well.

Deputy Tom Neville: In light of what has been mentioned here today about the blame culture that has been arising, we have to recognise the good work that is done by social workers in the system and by Tusla. It has quite rightly been mentioned that we do not see 99.9% of the good work that is done by these members. People do not shout about it from the rooftops. This House needs to look at some sort of communications strategy to start getting a message out there that will attract people in. Many issues have been mentioned with regard to supporting social workers, particularly young people coming into the profession who have a welcome vision or an ideology in relation to social work. Many of the skills that have been mentioned,

including project management, meeting co-ordination and relationship building, are actually business skills that should be part of the education of social workers. If that is already the case, I apologise for my ignorance. This should be looked at because it is clear from what has been articulated today that a huge amount of project management is involved in social work. The business skills that are required in addition to social skills should be pushed as well.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Neville. I have no difficulty whatsoever echoing his remarks about the good work that is being done. I get advance copies of HIQA reports about unfortunate cases once or twice a month. It can be particularly difficult to go through them because I am familiar with the precise nature of the headlines that will feature the following day.

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: Nearly every social worker welcomes HIQA, which has been mentioned, because it serves to improve the standard of the service that is provided to children and families who come into contact with Tusla. When HIQA identifies a difficulty, it tends to come back. When it comes back, I suppose there is a fatigue of assessment and a fatigue of being under the prism of an investigation. I know that some areas within Tusla, such as the Dublin south-central area, have had several HIQA investigations. This puts an awful lot of pressure on social workers in such areas. They feel they are responsible not only for their day-to-day work, but also for providing their files to investigators from HIQA who want to inspect those files and go through them with the social workers in question. They feel they are constantly being brought in for interview to explain what is happening and why it is happening. Many of these things come back to the lack of staff. Individual social workers feel they are under the gaze of HIQA.

Chairman: I understand.

Mr. Bernard Cantillon: They think they are having to take responsibility for this.

Chairman: It has been that way for some time. I do not expect it will change significantly in the near future. We can aspire to improve the position. On behalf of the joint committee, I thank the guests for their opening statement and for dealing so comprehensively with members' questions. At our next meeting on 11 June, we will meet representatives of Focus Ireland to begin our consideration of the impact of homelessness on children.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.20 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 11 June 2019.