

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN ROGHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 7 Márta 2018

Wednesday, 7 March 2018

Tháinig an Roghchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Select Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	
Kathleen Funchion,	
Denise Mitchell,	
Tom Neville,	
Anne Rabbitte,	
Sean Sherlock,	
Katherine Zappone (Minister for Children and Youth Affairs).	

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

Estimates for Public Services 2018

Vote 40 - Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Revised)

Chairman: I welcome members. I am aware that Deputy Denise Mitchell is running late owing to a family matter.

We are meeting to consider the Revised Estimate for Vote 40 for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs which was referred to the select committee by order of the Dáil on 14 December 2017. I welcome the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Katherine Zappone, and her many officials whom I thank them for the briefing material supplied. The proposed format of the meeting is that we will deal with the Vote on a programme by programme basis. At the outset of the consideration of each programme the Minister can give an overview of it. We will then take questions from members.

I remind members and those in the Visitors Gallery that mobile phones should be switched off completely for the duration of the meeting as they interfere with the broadcasting and recording systems, even when left in silent mode. I also remind members 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, her or it identifiable.

The briefing material supplied in advance on the various programmes has been forwarded to members. We will proceed sequentially and members will be called in the order in which they indicate.

I invite the Minister to make an opening statement.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I am very pleased to be here, together with my outstanding officials, to discuss my Department's Revised Estimate for 2018. In my opening statement I will provide a summary of what is included in each of the programme areas and may not need to do so again when we come to discuss each of those areas.

As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I remain completely committed to ensuring the full delivery of the programme for Government commitments. I want to see an Ireland in which the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; in which their voices are heard; and in which they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and into the future. Of course, we all know that if we work to allow them to achieve their maximum potential now, it will influence what happens in the future.

The Revised Estimate for my Department for 2018 provides for a gross funding provision of €1.383 billion which represents an increase of just under €73 million, or 6%, on its 2017 allocation. As a result, during 2018 my Department will spend €1.355 billion on current expenditure and €28 million on capital expenditure. This is a significant investment of taxpayers' money. My Department and its agencies are charged with the delivery of a complex range of policies, legislation and children's services. To achieve better outcomes for all children and families, I am sure Deputies will agree with me that we must invest wisely in key services. I remembered this well in negotiating the Estimate for 2018. I, therefore placed particular emphasis on ensur-

ing a solid financial base for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, together with priority areas for its development. I also prioritised continued investment in quality early years education and care services. These two areas comprise 90% of my Department's Vote. I also prioritised a number of other key elements, to which I will refer.

I have allocated €754 million to Tusla, which represents an increase of €40.6 million, or 5.6%, on the allocation for 2017 when the increase on the allocation for the previous year was €37 million. I have allocated €485 million for early years education and care services, which represents an increase of €20 million, or 4.3%, on the allocation for 2017.

The Vote also contains almost €62 million for youth services - €59 million in current funding and €3 million in capital support. These resources will fund youth services throughout the country, including services for those at risk of disadvantage. They represent an increase of €1.5 million, or 2.5%, on the allocation for 2017.

Other key expenditure figures include €28 million to meet the operational costs of the Oberstown children detention campus. I wish to say a few words about that investment. When I visited the campus on Tuesday, I was very impressed by what I witnessed and heard from the seven young men whom I met, as well as the director, Mr. Pat Bergin; the chairperson of the board of management, Professor Ursula Kilkelly, and some of the other members of Mr. Bergin's senior team. They talked to me about the young men on the campus advisory council, the equivalent of a student council, and what they had achieved. They had put in place a framework for the council. This is the first time ever in a detention centre that young men have worked with my Department in identifying standards which will feed into the reform of standards in the Oberstown centre. They spoke to me about the Gaisce awards they had received. They also talked to me about the random acts of kindness week in the school. They mentioned the various fundraising events in which they had participated, be it for the hospice or the Irish Cancer Society. They raised almost €2,000 in the past year. I promised them that I would mention this during the debate on the Estimates because I was very proud to meet them. Yes, they come from troubled backgrounds, but they are beautiful young men. Based on what I saw, I believe the investment - that is what we are talking about - is paying off.

To return to the Vote, €18 million has been allocated to meet the operational costs of my Department, €9 million for the area based childhood programme, €6 million for the intervention programme for children and young people, €4 million for the Adoption Authority of Ireland and just under €3 million for the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, all of which have seen an increase on the respective provision for 2017. In each case I am satisfied that the extra resources are justified and that the respective agencies are capable of delivering on the objectives set for them.

During the negotiations on budget 2018 I worked hard to achieve increased resources for the priority areas I had identified. I am pleased that, as a government, we can back up our stated commitment to children and young people with increased resources, targeted at the areas where we want to make a real difference in the lives of children and young people and their families. During the past few years I have been working to put Tusla on a firm financial footing and to give it the resources necessary to implement some key improvements to services. The €40 million extra for the agency this year means that it can continue to address a number of major concerns, including implementing the mandatory reporting provisions of the Children First Act, addressing my continuing concerns about unallocated cases, rolling out the national child care information system and supporting critical areas, such as private and residential foster care, and services for domestic, sexual and gender based violence, and child homelessness.

I have long been committed to the expansion of Tusla's out-of-hours social work service. Tusla's financial allocation for 2018 means that this will become a reality. It involves integrating the three existing out-of-hours services into one national service with a national contact number, and an out-of-hours call centre for all foster carers. I am pleased that this initiative will ensure that all parts of the country will have access to a social work service on a 24-7 basis.

In the area of family supports, which cover prevention, protection and welfare services, I was pleased to be able to fund an additional 11 family resource centres, and I will make an announcement about that next week, as well as providing increased funding to expand the excellent services provided by the existing 109 centres as well.

I am placing great emphasis on reforming the school completion programme to ensure that it is organised to best effect with a new governance structure. I believe that the programme does extremely important work with some of our most vulnerable young people, and I want to ensure that it is supported and developed in the years ahead.

In the area of early years, I am pleased that we have been making progress in the supports for parents of young children. Since my appointment one of my key priorities has been to address the historic under-resourcing in the area of child care.

As we are all aware international evidence is clear that investment in children during their early years results in long-term gains to children, families, the economy and society generally. I could not help thinking about that when I was in Oberstown.

In recent years the significant increases in resource provision has enabled my Department to advance a number of key reforms and 2018 represents another significant step forward in ensuring access to quality, affordable, and accessible early years care and education.

The ECCE scheme will apply effectively for a full two years from September 2018, and it currently benefits some 110,000 children. This will peak at about 126,000 children by April this year. In addition, there has been a huge uptake of the measures I introduced last September in advance of the affordable child care scheme. In 2017 we had an uptake rate of some 98%, or 68,000 registrations of children. The most recent figures available to my Department indicate that the registrations have now exceeded 70,000. I briefed the joint committee on 24 January 2018 on the progress we have been making to introduce the full affordable child care scheme and I will be able to set out a more specific timescale on it after the vendor for the new IT system has been appointed.

Among the legislative priorities that I will pursue this year are the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 [Seanad] which passed Second Stage in the Seanad some time ago; the Childcare Support Bill 2017, which passed Committee Stage last week. I thank members for their co-operation and contribution. This Bill, when enacted, will give statutory effect to the affordable child care scheme. The Children (Amendment) Bill which will form the basis for major reforms of the current guardian *ad litem* scheme and service.

I know the members of the select committee share my ambition to have all three of these important Bills enacted as soon as possible.

In conclusion, I believe that the significant increase in resources under my Department's Vote for 2018 brings great opportunities for a targeted development and improvement of services. I will work closely with Tusla, my own Department and all of the stakeholders to achieve the best possible outcomes and the best value for money. We have made very good progress

and I look forward to working with members to continue that in 2018 and in the years ahead.

Chairman: I will now call the individual programmes for Vote 40. Programme A is the children and family support programme to support and improve the existing service delivery arrangement to protect and support the welfare of children and young people in families, including oversight of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I thank the Chairman. As I indicated, I tried to summarise that in my opening statement. That is sufficient.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister for her statement, which was very welcome. I take it that the family resource centres come under programme A. I welcome the increase in funding for additional family resource centres. Last year there were 109 family resource centres and next year that number will increase to 119. That is positive and the family resource centres make a significant contribution. I welcome and acknowledge the work the Minister and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have put into this.

I understand the ECCE scheme comes under a separate subhead, but that Tusla comes under this programme.

The funding for Tusla has increased last year and this year. I want to drill down into the additional €40 million that has been allocated to Tusla this year. Did Tusla put an emphasis on a particular service where it wanted to spend some of that money in its business plan?

Chairman: The ECCE scheme comes under subhead B.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: That is okay.

Chairman: Will the Minister please respond?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes, Deputy Rabbitte, there were a number of areas, both in terms of my priorities, which I indicated to Tusla, as well as its own. The key priorities are obviously an increase in staff, with the recruitment of 442 new staff. It wants to respond to expected further increases in referrals following the introduction of mandatory reporting. There will be a further expansion of the Tusla out-of-hours social work service, as I indicated in my opening statement. The Deputy also referred to the increase in the number of and the expansion of the family resource centres.

There will be the completion of the much awaited national child care information system which I know the Deputy will be happy to hear about. I can speak a little bit more about that if the members so wish. There is further development in terms of the domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services. We will be adding an additional service for that work as well as supporting increased resources to ones that currently exist. There will be a focus on therapy services, the educational welfare services and of course, the strengthening of the current governance and management support services for Tusla.

We have not had the opportunity to speak about a new development, which we put in place last year. We will continue to provide services to unaccompanied minors. We are working on a plan to receive unaccompanied minors from Italy and Greece. We have received as many as will be coming from Calais and we have built the capacity and the expertise so that right now there are plans to do that as well.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Is that within the 200 unaccompanied minors which we discussed

in December 2016?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Is the Minister trying to meet the allocation quota of 200 minors?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes, absolutely, we took 41 minors from Calais. Those minors had been vetted and were identified and were able to come. I had the opportunity about a year and a half ago to visit one of the places where we were receiving unaccompanied minors. It is extraordinary the way the people work with these young people. They were able to give the minors support, especially as they learned the language to prepare them to go to school. The figure of 41 minors was as many as we could take from Calais, but it was a real priority for me personally. The agency responded quickly and with great expertise to put together that programme. Things have changed, in particular in terms of Italy, and I think we will be able to find ways to receive the young people here, whereas there were some blocks not so much on our side but in our negotiations with the Italian authorities. I believe some of the Tusla staff may have travelled to Italy recently or will go shortly.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: It is important to acknowledge that when this conversation started there was no framework in place. All credit is due to the Department for putting a unit in place to address what is an evolving issue. I thank the Minister.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: My question relates to the school completion programmes, which I believe falls under subhead A.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: It is confusing sometimes to know the category under which an issue falls. I welcome that the Minister singled out the school completion programme in her opening statement. At every opportunity I get I will raise that programme and the good work the people involved do. I honestly do not know how they do that fantastic work on the budget available to them. I am aware the Minister had the opportunity to visit the one in Kilkenny recently, which was very welcome. Is there any increase under the Tusla money for school completion? I welcome also the Minister's statement that there will be a slight increase for the domestic violence support services.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I thank the Deputy.

Chairman: I will group the questions because I only have a statement rather than a specific question. I note with appreciation the work of the Minister's officials, and the Minister also, who were involved in putting this together but from a personal perspective, having visited Oberstown and seen the facility, I wish to note with appreciation the 8% increase earmarked under subhead A4 and the various additional expenditures that are planned on the basis of that facility. I want to note that having viewed the work of Mr. Bergin, his staff and the facility. They even referenced the Minister having visited them on Tuesday and the Gaisce awards of which they are incredibly proud. They mentioned it several times while I was in the facility. It is very worthwhile for us to make our rehabilitation services as appropriate as they can be under those circumstances. That is my only comment.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I thank the Chairman. I deeply appreciate his statement and I believe they will be as appropriate as they can be as well. I want to acknowledge and express my appreciation for the great interest the committee has taken in this issue. That helps and

makes a difference, and it supports their movement towards these kinds of improvements.

I thank Deputy Funchion for asking about the school completion programme. To answer the question on the amount that has been allocated for 2018, as in 2017, it is the same amount of money that is being allocated, namely, €24.7 million. It is important to note the reasons for maintaining that investment at €24.7 million. As we are all aware, a reform of the programme is required. I have been working very closely with the Tusla executive, the board, my officials and effectively all the main stakeholders on examining the best way to reform. We had an event in Farmleigh at which we brought all the key stakeholders together. We are analysing that. I am getting more information from Tusla. I am aware that the school completion co-ordinators particularly as well as project workers and others who work on the programme are deeply concerned about the future, particularly into 2019. There is a sense of urgency to identify the way we will move forward in terms of governance, human resources and also the programmes they put in place. While I knew that we would be examining that, we make a similar investment in 2018. When recommendations are made to me and decisions made, and I ask for this information regularly from officials, we will be in a better position to identify whether we require increases and what those will be for 2019. I will be passionate and committed to ensuring that we have those increases for 2019.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I welcome the Minister's honest answer regarding the funding. I know she has consulted with the co-ordinators but it is very important to them that they are consulted. I have seen many good examples at first hand of people who have benefited greatly from school completion. If a student is in a school completion programme school he or she has access to counselling, play therapy at primary school level and homework clubs that help students with homework. The difference that makes to children cannot be measured. I want to stress to the Minister the need to ensure that the co-ordinators, and not just Tusla officials, are always kept in the consultation process because they are the people who have been dealing with the programme for years and they know their stuff, so to speak.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I totally agree with the Deputy. For example, of the four who came to the Farmleigh event, we asked if they would identify themselves and that they would report back to the other school completion co-ordinators. Subsequent to that, I have been to a couple of other regional locations including Kilkenny and my own constituency of Dublin South West. I also intend to meet other co-ordinators on the ground in the context of the schools where they are working with the wider team, the home school community liaison officer, the education and welfare officer, the school principal and the chair of the local management committee. I want to hear their concerns and take those into account as well as the recent event and the work of the officials and the Tusla executive, whose members I know have put a huge amount of effort into their recommendations.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I have a final question on this section. It relates to the context and the impact indicators. I see that the number of open cases with Tusla assessed as needing a social worker is up to Quarter 2. I assume that is to June 2017. At that stage, the number of open cases needing a social worker was 25,886 and for the entire year 2016 the number was 25,034. Can the Minister explain that to me? There is an asterisk beside it.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The Deputy is asking about the numbers of children in care.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: When I look at that figure it appears there is a huge increase in the

number of children awaiting a social care worker. The Minister might be able to correct that for me because it is only up to Quarter 2.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I have the number of open cases with Tusla needing a social work service. In 2015, there were 26,665; in 2016, there were 25,034; and in 2017, there were 24,891.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: That is for the completed year.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: That is a different figure from the one in front of me.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I have data here to the end of December 2017.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Which is 24,891.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: When I saw the asterisk I thought it was-----

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I appreciate that. That is the updated data.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister.

Chairman: Programme B is the sectoral programmes for children and young people to support the provision of both universal and targeted services for the care, development and well-being of children and young people. Any members offering?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Programme B?

Chairman: Programme B is the early childhood care and education scheme, ECCE.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I have some general, broad-stroke questions. Is now an appropriate time to ask them?

Chairman: Yes, if the Deputy could specify the programme.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I have to ask some hard questions.

Chairman: We are going programme by programme, so I ask the Deputy to stay on subhead B.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Do I have the floor, Chairman? I am happy to yield to Deputy Rabbitte if she has a question.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: My question is to do with the ECCE. The announcement last year of the extra two years of the ECCE was very welcome but that does not come in until September 2018. What happens to the children who thought they would enrol in January or April this year? Some of the providers are saying they cannot take them on because the scheme has changed but, technically, it will not change until September. What is happening in the meantime? It is a question of operation more than anything else.

Chairman: I want to group if I can. For the benefit of Deputy Sherlock, programme B is the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme, general child care programmes and

initiatives, youth organisations and services, area-based childhood programmes, intervention programmes for children, which is the Dormant Account Fund, and the peace and reconciliation programme.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I have it.

Chairman: The Deputy has it. I did not realise. Are there any other questions on subhead B? No.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: To be clear, in respect of ECCE, we are still taking enrolments in January 2018 and April 2018. Then we move to the other items we have indicated, in September 2018, that one entry point.

Chairman: We move to programme C, the policy and legislation programme to oversee key areas of policy legislation and intersectoral collaboration to improve the lives and well-being of children and young people. Do any members wish to comment on or question this subhead?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: My question has to do with mother and baby homes. Statements are ongoing again in the Dáil this morning in respect of this. Does the Minister see the mother and baby homes, the particular scope of works being done, coming to completion this year? Will we have a finalised document at the end of this year?

Chairman: Do any other members wish to comment? No. On the same subject matter, like I am sure some of my colleagues, I will be contributing to that debate later this morning.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes, indeed.

Chairman: That is a relevant question from Deputy Rabbitte. Indeed, there is an article in this morning's *Irish Examiner* from Ms Catherine Corless on the specific request she has made in respect of the ultimate findings of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes. I am going to operate on the assumption she contributed to that article on the basis of information she has been provided with in respect of DNA tracing. Is the Minister confident the commission has sufficient monetary funding to complete this as quickly as possible? I know it might roll into next year in respect of finalisation of the report, as is envisaged in the interim report. However, the Minister might like to comment on that.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: In respect of the money, as Deputies will note, in 2018 the overall budget is €3.3 million. That is a decrease of 44% or €2.7 million on the allocation for 2017. Why is there that decrease? It is because there was an overall amount allocated to the commission to do its work, whether it was three or four years. What it has found, certainly in terms of its work in 2017, is that there is more than enough money. The Government agreed to extend the timeframe for an extra year, and in light of that agreement, the commission is scheduled to report in February 2019. The commission still has sufficient money in respect of the overall allocation for its work. We are spreading it out over a four-year period as distinct from the three-year period. That is why there is a decrease in 2018. This was agreed in formal engagement with the commission in terms of its work.

I will come back to the comment on Tuam. On Deputy Rabbitte's question on whether the work will be completed by February of 2019, that is what I have agreed with the independent commission in respect of its third interim report and its request for that one-year extension. As the Deputy is aware, the plan initially was to stagger the three reports - the history report, the investigative report and the confidential committee report of the evidence of witnesses who

came before it - and that they would be sequential. The commission made a decision some time ago, however, when it put out either its first or second interim report, that it needed to put out all of those reports at the same time to provide the best possible picture. That continues to be the case. My understanding, as I said, is that its intention is to report then. That is all I can say right now because it is an independent commission.

In respect of the specific question, as the Deputy is aware, to complement its work and add to the transitional justice approach that the commission effectively is engaged in as well, a number of other things have been happening, particularly in regard to key stakeholders and survivors or people who were actually residents in the home. One of these has been to facilitate a consultative process. In terms of response to the second interim report, we are now moving towards a more representative facilitative process in which we have identified people to form a representative group to work with Mr. Gerry Kearney to take a look at the requests of the key stakeholders in terms of, for example, health and well-being supports and how to memorialise in relation to all of the mother and baby homes. That that will begin relatively soon. I have indicated as well to the people who are initiating this second consultative process that I would appreciate if they could report to me as soon as possible once they have gathered the group, taken a look at its suggestions and formed a consensus on the kinds of health and well-being supports that they would like and find useful. I have asked that this would be recommended to me for the Government to have a look at it, and this may happen prior to the commission reporting to me in 2019. It is important to say that.

I refer to what is going on in Tuam, which is narrower and distinct from the wider issues in respect of the mother and baby homes commission. We are now marking a year since the discovery, and that is what the reports are reminding us of. Since that discovery, we have put in place a process to try to respond appropriately to the terrible tragedy that was discovered and that we witnessed. We are continuing to do what we said. We are having a technical group look at the possible options for what can be done in respect of what happened in Tuam and to put that out to consultation. We have passed that over to Galway County Council. My understanding is that consultative process has various aspects to its methodology, one of which is to put out a questionnaire for people to respond to. A second one, equally valid and important, is that the group would meet whoever wanted to meet it. There was a gathering in Dublin and there will be a gathering in Galway relatively soon. It is a facilitated process. I asked that one or two of the members of the technical group be present for that so that there can be engagement. When that is completed, recommendations will come to me in respect of all of the interested stakeholders who participated in the process. We will bring that then to an interdepartmental group that my Secretary General, Mr. Fergal Lynch, has been chairing. It will examine those recommendations, ultimately come to me and I will bring them to Government. We are doing what we said we would do. I am aware of how much time is passing and I really do appreciate the feelings as a result of that. I hope it can continue at the pace that it is doing, that we will get those recommendations as soon as possible and decisions can be made.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister for her response. I met a gentleman during the week who was part of the mother and baby homes. He got the opportunity to attend counselling. He called to thank me. I do know what the Minister has said is starting to filter down. People are appreciating that. It was the first time he felt he was going to have the chance to speak to somebody - he is nearly 70 - and express what had happened to him, and that somebody somewhere was prepared to listen. I know about the reports available today. People are looking forward to seeing that we are still on the pathway to a resolution somewhere along the way. That is all.

Chairman: Does Deputy Sherlock wish to speak?

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Not on that issue. I have a number of questions.

Chairman: The Deputy can come in at the end. There will be an opportunity to go over everything. We will move on to subhead D, appropriations-in-aid. There can be some general comments. We are not dealing specifically with mother and baby homes. It is quite a broad head. If the Deputy wants to contribute on any of those matters he is welcome to do so.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: There are a couple of key policy issues. I want to comment on how those policy outputs map across the appropriations. My first question relates to the affordable child care scheme. We know there is significant staff turnover in child care facilities; some estimates put the figure at as high as 30%. How do we address this high rate of turnover? The overheads and administrative burdens in individual facilities are increasing. Can anything be done about that? Does the Minister have a perspective on how we can address the high rate of turnover, given the high level of qualifications within the sector? Is there a mechanism to build in possible budgets for individual facilities to account for the increased overhead as a result of administrative costs? Could the Minister allow for some provision to be made for continuous professional development? It is a key factor in any career. I understand some segments within the sector are asking for up to five days for some provision to be made for that. I ask for a perspective from the Minister on where the policy is going in respect of all of these challenges.

Chairman: I would like to group the questions. We will go through them on an individual basis.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Another issue is communications. There has been some controversy - if I can use that term - about the SCU. It was reported by Hugh O'Connell in *The Sunday Business Post* that on July 9 the Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, responded to a memo stating that the child care subsidy scheme being announced by the Government later in the summer should be a key campaign run by the SCU. He is quoted as saying, "Again, should be a thing the Govt is doing for you, not the Dept of Children & Youth ... I think there should be a campaign run on this throughout August."

I note the Minister has made some comments in the public domain about possible interaction with the Taoiseach on this. I want to glean from the Minister who is in control of the Department's communications. Is it now a function of the SCU? Will it become a function of the SCU if it is not currently such a function or is the Minister in control of her budget line which, as I understand it, totals approximately €113,000 if the FOI figure is to be believed? I cannot see the specific figure in the Estimates. Perhaps the Minister might assist us with that. I would make the case that the Minister and her Department should be in control of the communications strategy. If the interaction between the sector and all of its constituent parts is close to the Minister in terms of relationships I do not see the need for that to be elevated to the Department of the Taoiseach which is at another remove. There is a political issue in terms of control and it is more of a political question for the Minister.

I refer to the allocation for Tusla. To be fair to the Minister, she has secured some €754 million for Tusla, an increase of €40 million. In my mind I find it difficult to reconcile the increase in the budget for Tusla and the number of HIQA reports coming into the public domain across a wide range of issues. I am trying to glean whether the HIQA reports are being acted upon on a regional basis and when we can expect success in respect of the recommendations in each of the HIQA reports.

I tabled a parliamentary question seeking information on the number of social workers in the system. The response I got was that there was an average of ten years duration in career length. It is a tough job and I can understand that there is a high rate of attrition in the sector for all sorts of reasons. Is there something in the Minister's vision which will speak to the budget lines before us and address the decline in numbers over a longer-term period? Is the Minister liaising with other Departments to see how we can encourage more people to become social workers and social care workers? They are key personnel and act as an interface between the challenges the sector faces and outputs.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I apologise for being late. I refer to the recruitment of social workers. The Minister spoke passionately about the recruitment and retention of staff. I would appreciate if she could update the committee on the numbers who have been recruited and how we can retain current staff.

I ask the Minister to bear with me because I will probably get this wrong. Under the context and impact indicators for Tusla it is stated that the number of open cases with Tusla assessed as needing a social work service, which includes children in care, is nearly 26,000. That figure is very high. Could the Minister outline what sorts of services are required by those children? Does she believe there are enough funds to deal with this issue?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will start with Deputy Sherlock's questions on child care programmes and staff turnover, which is an issue I am well aware of and concerned about. In the budget for 2018, there were a couple of aspects of negotiations for the child care programme which I hoped would assist in ensuring increased resources for providers. My ultimate hope is those resources could be shared with workers, although as the Deputy is aware I cannot make those decisions because I am not the employer.

The increase of €20 million in the early years programme, in addition to the repurposing of moneys from 2017 to enable us to do some extra significant things for 2018, will, it is to be hoped, have an impact in terms of the moneys which ultimately get to the providers and workers. This is by way of response to the question on turnover. Some turnover is due to difficulties with pay and conditions. For example, from September 2018 we will have two full years of the ECCE scheme which is why it was so important for me to increase the ECCE capitation from September 2018 because it will mean more money for providers. We also continue to provide €18 million to providers in recognition of the administrative burden in supporting various child care schemes.

The Deputy also asked that we would maintain our investment in ongoing continuing professional development. I will be meeting the early years forum, which I established, later today to discuss staffing. I have indicated that in my negotiations into 2019 I have an eye on quality which is a code word for the workforce and supporting it to provide that quality. We have contracted an independent review of costs. That work will be completed in plenty of time for me to have the information to negotiate for 2019. We will see for the first time whether we are investing enough in costs and the examination of pay and conditions of the workforce. We are substantially assisting services which have been in crisis, some of which has to do with staff. We are also considering continuing professional development. The learner funds have been going on for several years, and the Síolta and Aistear mentors in training are in place.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: How do the individual providers bid for the €18 million to help with the administrative burden?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: A certain amount is given to the providers generally for non-contact time to support and acknowledge the time they spend outside the rooms with the children. In addition we provided a certain sum of money per child registration per type of service in the interim measures introduced in September 2017 because we acknowledged there was additional work for the providers in signing children up to each of those services.

There were two questions about the child care campaign that we conducted in the summer, some of the Taoiseach's communications on that and the Department's communication of what we are doing. It will not come as any surprise to the Deputy, because it was mentioned in the media, that I raised some serious concerns with the Taoiseach about what had happened with the strategic communications unit, SCU, and Project Ireland 2040, particularly focusing on the need for a Department to maintain editorial control of the use of taxpayers' money, the purchase of advertising or the content provided to the newspapers. I welcomed the Taoiseach's response to those concerns, and we are now in the middle of a debate about what will happen as a result of the review by the Secretary General as well as the independent scrutiny by the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO, that is expected and by the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland. A lot of scrutiny will be going on, and then we will move to make some decisions.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: The Minister has pushed back on that issue.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I raised some questions about what was going on. I respect that the Taoiseach was willing to respond to those along with the other Independent Ministers, Deputies Naughten and Ross.

As the Deputy is aware, in respect of the changes we were introducing last September to provide parents and their families and children with significant additional supports, it was very important for us to communicate and provide information on how these changes would happen for families and the providers. The Department developed a campaign for that. We did that during the summer and it was effectively a time in the early period of the strategic communications unit. It had not been fully established and could not work with us to communicate the information. I had exchanges with the Taoiseach on that, and I was very clear that we would be able to conduct the campaign ourselves.

It is very important that the departmental officials work with the communications unit in the Department of the Taoiseach and provide their experience and expertise in the communication of our programmes. We intend to do that through *government.ie* and with additional types of communication. If there are any changes, the people with the experience and expertise will inform and be close to the ways of communicating what we need to do.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I also asked about the high turnover of staff, especially social workers.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will discuss Tusla now. In 2018, Tusla expects to recruit an additional 45 social workers, 57 social care workers, nine nursing staff and 53 other health professionals, which include early years inspectors, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. That is a significant portion of the breakdown of the 422 extra whole-time equivalent employees it will recruit. The grade breakdown for the remaining 145 is being finalised. Family support workers are to be recruited. The officials and I have been encouraging Tusla to complete its workforce strategy which it will do shortly for this year and for the next couple of years. That will assist considerably in determining the mix of staff required to do the work of Tusla. It is not to say that we do not need to continue to recruit the social workers.

The Deputy asked whether we were engaging with other Departments to do that and the answer is “Yes”, especially the Department of Education and Skills. That is more medium to long-term. There is continuing engagement between the officials, Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills to establish how many social workers we can turn out through higher education because we need more, not just for Tusla but for other agencies and organisations. Therefore, it is important to work in the medium and long term to increase the number of social workers available to be recruited but also to be clear and creative about the mix of the overall workforce to respond appropriately to the number of services, referrals and cases, and family, early intervention and prevention work that Tusla does. The other thing that is a key aspect that will be supportive for Tusla is the fact that there has been a major ICT roll-out - not just the national child care information system but the development of a strategy as well as the increase in something as simple as the number of laptops social workers and other workers will have so that they will be able to do their work more efficiently and get to the work they are intended to do as distinct from the time it might have taken in terms of administrative aspects so it would impact positively on staff productivity. As Deputies are aware, Tusla established its own recruitment programme to deal with the significant issue of recruiting and the various types of professionals in addition to social workers. There does not appear to have been significant issues recruiting most other grades with the exception of social workers. It is important to acknowledge that Tusla has taken a proactive approach with regard to the other professionals it is looking for.

In response to Deputy Mitchell’s question about the open cases, 24,891 open cases were identified as needing a social work service at the end of 2017. That goes back to a question from Deputy Rabbitte. Of these, 19,999 had a named allocated social worker so, therefore, 4,892 were awaiting the allocation of a social worker, which represents 20% of the open cases. I remind members that where a child needs an urgent response, they are dealt with urgently and immediately by the social workers. The number of social workers at the end of 2017 was 1,466. We hope that by the end of 2018, there will be an additional 45 so it needs to recruit 214 to achieve this because of those who will be leaving. It is important to note that in addition to social workers, Tusla also utilises another agency for social workers in order to complete the work.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Could the Minister give us a timeframe between when contact is first made and when a child is allocated a social worker? How long a period are we looking at? What is the timeframe?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will come back to that because we do have an answer. I appreciate the Deputy’s question about the HIQA reports. Along with my officials, I have on occasion met with HIQA to listen to its general approach regarding working with Tusla. As the Deputy is aware, HIQA reports include an action plan provided by Tusla to respond to the report. This is accepted by HIQA. Usually when those reports come out, Tusla’s response is that certain standards have been met, others have not, action plans have been recommended and we are putting in place additional resources to ensure that these actions can be implemented if additional resources are required. Certainly, additional resources are being provided for the record keeping of the NCCIS, ten of whose regional centres are already piloting this new approach. It has indicated that by June or mid-year, all of the regions will have that new information system working, which will impact significantly the sharing and recording of information and the ability to respond more quickly. This is not in defence *per se* of Tusla but until that is in place, there will be some things that HIQA will continue to say to the agency that will be difficult to respond to as quickly compared what might happen once it is in place. Once it is in place, we anticipate significant changes in that regard and that standards will be met. Ad-

ditional resources are being provided for family support and prevention services as well as the recruitment work about which we have spoken. The Deputy asked a question about policy and practice. Policy and practice are being improved through the roll-out of new practices called Signs of Safety, which will assist in the consistency and quality of the response. I had the opportunity to work with some of the people in Tusla or at least participate in a conference where they looked at the approach they developed, training in terms of their workforce and Signs of Safety and the research that underpins to ensure that this was a model of best practice to continue the work they are doing.

Deputy Mitchell asked about the timeframe. As I have already said, all urgent cases are seen immediately. As the Deputy may be aware, cases are assessed in terms of priority - high, medium and low - particularly concerning the child's need for protection and support. The length of time is three months, having made those points about any urgent cases being seen immediately and assessment in terms of a case's priority.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Three months is a quarter of a year in effect. I would like further clarification of the figures of 45, 57, nine and 53. I think the Minister mentioned 45 social workers, 57-----

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I can give a full breakdown but that was to indicate some of the important aspects.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: With regard to the figure of nine, I did not quite pick up the-----

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Nursing staff.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: That is the key one I wanted to zone in on. With regard to the nine nursing staff, the Minister may be aware of Barnardos' "Lost" campaign, which is quite an impactful campaign. One of its asks arising from that is that there would be a dedicated child and family public health system with guaranteed home visits. I know that technically this is not the Minister's area but I ask for some engagement between the Department and the Department of Health on this issue.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: On public health nurses.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Yes, because we all know the value of public health nurses, we know exactly what they do and we know they are extremely good at picking up signs within a family home. If there was a facility whereby there were more home visits, it would have a very strong longitudinal effect because we know that sometimes home visits stop after a certain period of time once a child is born. Starting off at home, Barnardos asks what can be done to ensure all children have a good start and suggests introducing a dedicated child and family public nurse system with guaranteed home visits. I did not give the Minister notice of my intention to ask this question but I would like to hear her perspective, whether she feels that this is something that is worth pursuing and whether she might engage with the Department of Health or the Minister for Health with a view to seeing whether work could be carried out between the two Departments on this issue.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: That is an excellent question. Our public health nurses do extraordinary work that is so significant early on along with staying with children and families. That is my first comment. Second, we are already engaging with the Department of Health on this. Third, in terms of the earlier strategies we are developing, we are also going to consider a dedicated child health workforce.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Will the Minister report back to us on the progress on that?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will.

Chairman: Subhead D is appropriations-in-aid. I will lead on this should anyone else wish to contribute. Can the Minister give us information on subhead D.6, the Dormant Account Fund, where there is an increase of €1 million? Subhead D.7, EU receipts under the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation have gone from zero to €740,000. What is that for? Furthermore, has she had any discussions with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, perhaps, or at EU level as to whether there might be issues relating to peace and reconciliation funding, which is in subhead B as well, as it applies to her Department and whether any impacts are expected in future annual accounts? What impact might Brexit have on those subheads?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: On the two questions about the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, it was a new part of the Vote for 2017. The PEACE IV programme is a cross-Border initiative funded by the EU, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly and is managed by a special EU programme body. That is a general response to the first part of the Chairman's question. On the second part, virtually every time we have discussions in Cabinet regarding Brexit, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade is very keen to emphasise that in our negotiations on Brexit the resources for the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation will be maintained. To the extent that we are moving positively in the negotiation on all the elements, that is right up there in the negotiations.

On the Dormant Accounts Fund, the increase is attributable to new projects coming on stream, in particular crime intervention and peer support adoption. There are others. In addition, there is what we call the quality capacity building initiative or, effectively, the initiative we have been developing over the last year or two to mainstream lessons learned in the prevention and early intervention work and the investment of Atlantic Philanthropies over the last decade. This is to ensure that those lessons become part of the system for ongoing training and mentoring on what we have learned for our current and future professional workforce, in terms of pulling together much of the data on the programmes that work into one place and one website. That is one aspect of it. We also are using the moneys for a youth employability initiative, the Big Brother Big Sister programme. The increase in the Dormant Accounts Fund is responsible for a number of programmes.

Chairman: I appreciate the Minister's answer. That concludes the analysis of each subhead. Do members have any final comments?

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank the Minister and her officials for attending the meeting.

Chairman: I thank the members for their contributions. On behalf of the members, I thank the Minister and her officials for the responses to our questions and for attending the meeting. As we have completed our consideration of the Revised Estimates for Vote 40, in accordance with Standing Order 90 the following message will be sent to the Dáil:

The Select Committee on Children and Youth Affairs has considered the Revised Estimates for Vote 40.

Under Standing Order 89(2) the message is deemed to be a report of this committee.

Before adjourning I will seek, and I hope the Minister will note my remark, the committee's permission to write to the Business Committee requesting that, where possible, it try to avoid

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clashes with matters in the Dáil and Seanad relating specifically to this Department. For the last 11 minutes there has been a debate in the Dáil on the mother and baby homes while we have been discussing budgets. That is entirely inappropriate. I appreciate there will be times when there might be a clash but where possible we should try to avoid our meetings clashing with debates at which we should be present. I thank everybody for their attendance.

The select committee adjourned at 10.47 am *sine die*.