

Mr. Bernard Gloster,
Chief Executive Officer,
Tusla – Child and Family Agency,
Heuston South Quarter,
St. John's Road W, 2-5, Kilmainham,
Dublin 8.

Sent to: ceo@tusla.ie

14 April 2022

Dear Bernard,

Re: Disruption in Residential Care Service Provision

The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) and specifically our Child and Family Special Interest Group are deeply concerned about the current crisis in residential placements for some children in care in Ireland. Children in need of residential placements are some of the most vulnerable children in Ireland, and the impact of delays, and of disrupted or short term and inappropriate placements can have long-lasting and damaging consequences for them. The IASW are aware of many young people who have been placed out of their county and at times out of their province, meaning that they not only lose regular contact with their family and friends, but also must change school, sports teams, or other activities. Many of these young people have to leave services that they may be involved in, such as mental health services and start again with a different care team. The IASW are also informed that due to the crisis in available placements that a number of young people are currently being accommodated in hotel accommodation with support from care staff, until appropriate placements can be sourced.

Availability of placements

The lack of appropriate placements for children has been of concern for some time and is greatly exacerbated by the news that a leading provider of private placements has notified Tusla that they are ceasing to provide eleven single and dual occupancy placements with one month's notice. Such placements are provided to young people with high level of need, who require intensive support from staff and who may typically have had a number of previous placement breakdowns.

While the IASW is not aware of the circumstances leading to this decision, we are concerned that the reliance on private and for-profit placement providers leaves the wider system unstable, and susceptible to the sudden loss of placements for children. The IASW supports Tusla in its commitment to reducing the reliance on private placements but cautions that this change should not be made before there is stable and sustainable provision available within Tusla services.

The IASW is also concerned about the recruitment and retention of foster carers who provide care for the vast majority of children and young people in care in Ireland. Foster care payments have not increased in over a decade and alongside the

current fostering recruitment campaigns undertaken by Tusla, an increase in payment in line with inflation should be immediately considered.

Supports to prevent placement breakdown and carer burnout

The IASW recognise that the crisis in residential care is systemic and multi-faceted. Many of the children who require residential care have difficulties forming attachments due to their early childhood experiences with many having multiple placement breakdowns within foster care. It is essential that foster carers and fostering support teams are fully resourced to provide the complex care required by children who may have experienced abuse and neglect prior to coming into care. This requires a fully resourced staff team, and wider staffing challenges in Tusla impacts the provision of the support and services needed for foster carers.

Children in care also benefit from a consistent, trusting relationship with their social worker, and the most recent HIQA reports in relation to this have highlighted repeated acknowledgment by children, families, and carers that these relationships, when available, have a huge impact on their care experience and outcomes. Again, the turnover of staff and the pressure on individual social workers undermines their capacity to form such consistent and available relationships with the children with whom they work. This means that some children do not have a relationship with their allocated social worker where they can raise questions or any concerns they may have and this in turn creates risk for children, their care planning, and their placements.

It is acknowledged that Tusla are working very hard to address this residential care crisis, however there are limitations in what can be achieved when the numbers of social workers and social care workers required exceeds the number available, for various reasons, including number of college places, issues accessing practice placements and recruitment and retention issues more generally across a range of organisations. Tusla undoubtedly faces its own specific issues in recruitment and retention of staff and efforts to address these issues must continue to be prioritised.

Concerns for residential care facilities

It is evident that the financing and oversight of residential care services would be more stable and ultimately sustainable if provided within Tusla. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the full range of such placements are not currently available, and more importantly the specialised therapeutic placements including single and dual occupancy placements are almost always provided by private and for-profit providers. It is critical that any changes to service provision ensures that the needs of the most vulnerable children can be met within Tusla, and where that is not possible that the ability to seek appropriate placements that have the resources and expertise that children need remain available in the interim. Within such a structure, using funding mechanisms that seek to find the lowest bidder, in these circumstances, is not necessarily a child-centred approach and the most appropriate and well-resourced service should always be the outcome sought in the procurement process. This includes provision for:

- A diverse range of placements that meet the needs of children with different needs,
- Adequate numbers of qualified staff to work in residential care,
- Appropriate and timely access to the necessary therapeutic supports for children in residential care,
- HIQA inspection of all residential units to ensure consistency of standard for all young people in residential care, and
- Ongoing and adequate investment in training for staff.

In addition to expressing our significant concerns at recent unwelcome developments in residential children's services, as outlined above, the IASW remains committed to contributing positively in whatever way we can, to ensure the continuing development and sustainability of social work and other services that address the needs of children and families using those services.

Yours faithfully,



Vivian Geiran
Chairperson, IASW