DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHAINCHEISTEANNA RÍTHÁBHACHTACHA A THÉANN I GCION AR AN LUCHT SIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Déardaoin, 9 Deireadh Fómhair 2025

Thursday, 9 October 2025

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	**Seanadóirí / Senators**
John Connolly,	Maria Byrne,
Dessie Ellis,	Eileen Flynn,
Tony McCormack,	Malcolm Noonan,
Séamus McGrath,	Anne Rabbitte.
Naoise Ó Muirí,	
Maurice Quinlivan,	
Pádraig Rice.	

Teachta / Deputy George Lawlor sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session at 12.34 p.m., suspended at 12.37 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.40 p.m.

Business of Joint Committee

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Apologies have been received from Deputy Lawlor. He is in the Dáil at the moment but he will be back to chair the meeting at around 12.50 p.m. or 1 p.m.

As agreed before we went into public session, we would just like to take a few minutes to remember the people who were killed in the Carrickmines tragedy, which was ten years ago tomorrow. It is very important as a committee that we remember Thomas and Sylvia Connors, baby Jim, Christy, little Mary, Jimmy Lynch, Willie Lynch and Tara Gilbert, Kelsey and Jodie, and their families. It is hard to believe that it was ten years ago almost to the day when we woke up to the tragedy of the Carrickmines fire and how it shook Ireland at the time. It is very unfortunate that it needs to be said that Carrickmines was not just a tragedy; it was the result of years of failure and years of living in failed accommodation. It was rundown accommodation in an area that was not fit for purpose for Travellers to be living in. Today, 1,700 Traveller families are still living in unsafe conditions. We need to say that. We need to be honest as a committee that for many decades Travellers has been failed through different systems, including the education system and through housing and employment. As a committee we hope to make the lives of those in the Traveller community better. We are never going to do that overnight but it is brilliant to have this committee as a long-standing committee. I know that every single Traveller in the country is thinking of the people who lost their lives in Carrickmines. I will open up the floor to the members. If any member wishes to come in to make a comment please feel free to do so.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I would like to be associated with the Leas-Chathaoirleach's comments. What happened in Carrickmines was an awful tragedy. I am from Offaly and we have a very strong Offaly Travellers group there. I am delighted to see that a lot of work has been done on halting sites, official and unofficial, in order that this type of tragedy does not happen in the future. My thoughts and prayers go to the friends and family of those people who passed away so many years ago.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I join with the Leas-Chathaoirleach and the other members here to acknowledge and remember the ten people who lost their lives in Carrickmines. I attended the funerals of some of the victims in Wexford. Certainly that day will stay in my mind forever. It has to continue to focus all of our collective minds - here in this committee, in all agencies and in the Government - to ensure we never have another incident like that. As the Leas-Chathaoirleach has said, there are still families living in deplorable conditions and in overcrowded conditions right across the country, and in conditions where there is still a fire risk. It is critically important that the work of this committee, and that of the Government, remains focused on ensuring no more incidents like that occur. Again, our hearts are with the families on the tenth anniversary.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for marking the tenth anniversary. It is very important for the families and for their relatives to have their names read aloud here today. The Leas-Chathaoirleach has done sterling work in remembering them. At the same time, I totally agree, as I think all of us will, that while a lot has been done there is an awful lot more to do when it comes to Traveller accommodation and the support and welfare support

that is required for Travellers. This is why we have this committee and why we sit every week. We take this role very seriously and we want to ensure we can make a difference.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I echo the sentiments in remembering the families who died in Carrickmines. In the past I have experienced similar incidents in Dunsink Lane. The accommodation issues we face have to be addressed. We cannot allow another Carrickmines to happen. There is certainly a lot of work to be done. I will do my utmost, as I have always done, to try to make sure this does not happen again and to raise it every time I have a chance. My sympathy goes out to all the members of their families on this day.

Deputy John Connolly: I share the sentiments of the other members. I think in particular of the Connors family, the Lynch family and the family of Tara Gilbert. I read an article last week in the paper in which Ben Lynch discussed the continued pain from this tragedy and the increased sense of pain he feels as the tenth anniversary approaches.

I share the sentiment of everyone that while we should not need it, the anniversary of the Carrickmines fire should be a reminder to us all of the necessity to make sure we improve the standard of accommodation for members of the Traveller community and the particular role that we on this committee have in highlighting that. I express my sympathies to all the families.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for raising this issue and for reading the names of the ten people into the Official Report. It is really important we do this on the tenth anniversary. We all remember where we were when we heard about what had happened. We all remember the trauma. Fortunately we are probably lucky that we have not had a second one or another one. The Leas-Chathaoirleach referred to the 1,700 Traveller families living in accommodation that is not suitable. That needs to be addressed. Hopefully, while working on this committee everybody here is committed to doing the best they can. We will have failed in our job if we do not come out of this committee at the end of term with some improvements, be they in education, housing, or employment, which is a massive issue as well. I offer my deepest sympathy to the family and friends of those who died. All Travellers will be traumatised tomorrow because they will remember that date. I have spoken to a few of them in Limerick about that already.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for raising this on the tenth anniversary. It was an absolute tragedy and an unspeakable tragedy with the loss of life and the impact on families. That impact continues, obviously. In many ways it is a byword for lack of progress on Traveller issues around accommodation and supports. As others have said, we have to continually remember what happened and use it as a reminder and motivation to try to make progress and to continue the work we are doing as a committee and the broader work that needs to be done to improve the lot of Travellers and the Traveller community. It is absolutely fitting to raise it here today. Has the Chair suggested a moment of silence? We should have one and it would be appropriate.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Deputy for his suggestion of a moment's silence. It is important to use that minute to reflect as a committee on the many issues that really impact so many Travellers in Ireland today, such as mental health, accommodation and education. We have to keep raising these issues. We never want to see an instance like Carrickmines ever again. It is important that we remember the victims today and their families. We will observe a minute of silence.

Members rose.

Child Protection and Family Support: Discussion (Resumed)

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the officials from Tusla to the meeting. I thank them for accepting the invitation of the committee to discuss this important topic. Apologies have been received from Senator Joe O'Reilly. As I said at the beginning of the meeting, Deputy Lawlor is in the Dáil.

As the witnesses are within the grounds of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the committee meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person in such a way as make him or her identifiable.

Is it okay with Tusla if we publish its submission on the committee website? Okay. I now invite Tusla to give its opening statement to the committee and then members will ask questions.

Senator Malcolm Noonan took the Chair.

Ms Kate Duggan: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach, Deputy Lawlor and the rest of the committee for the invitation to appear today. Before I begin with our submission, on behalf of Tusla I offer our deepest condolences to the families, friends and, as the Leas-Chathaoirleach said, the wider Traveller community who will find tomorrow to be a very difficult day. We certainly extend our thoughts and sympathies to them.

I am joined by my colleagues, Mr. Gerard Brophy, chief social worker, Ms Áine O'Keeffe, service director for Tusla educational support services, TESS, and Ms Caroline Jordan, interim area manager with responsibility for Garda liaison, Children First, family support and social inclusion. This is my first opportunity as chief executive officer of Tusla to appear before the committee. We are grateful for the opportunity to meet it today to discuss key issues affecting the Traveller community, particularly in relation to child protection and welfare, education support and family support services.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency is the State agency responsible for improving the safety and well-being of children and families through the provision of a range of services, including family support, child protection, alternative care - foster care and residential care - Tusla education support services and the children's services regulation service. In the 11 years since Tusla's establishment, the agency has grown significantly, with a 100% increase in child protection and welfare referrals. In 2024, we received 96,666 child protection and welfare referrals and we expect that number to reach over 105,000 in 2025. Some 5,823 young people are in our foster care, residential care and aftercare services. Some 22,839 cases were open to social work; 48,443 young people received a family support service, and 8,659 young people were referred to our education support services for the 2024-2025 school year. In recent years, we have also developed and expanded our services and implemented new services in line with changing policy and legislation, such as the birth information and tracing service and childminding registration. We have rapidly scaled up services to respond to an almost 500%

increase in separated children seeking international protection, with 893 of these young people being accommodated by, or in the care of, Tusla at the end of 2024.

As an agency we acknowledge the historical and ongoing marginalisation of the Traveller community in Ireland and we are committed to ensuring we adopt culturally sensitive approaches in our engagement with, and provision of services to, children and families who are part of the Traveller community. It is estimated that 32,949 Travellers live in Ireland, that 40% experience severe material deprivation, that they are significantly over-represented among the homeless, that they experience an unemployment rate of approximately 88%, and that 75% report discrimination. A significant number of Traveller children are estimated to live in poverty, with one recent survey suggesting this is as high as 96%, with high infant mortality and suicide rates. The percentage of Travellers who continue in education to third year is now at 91.6% and 78.3% sit junior cycle examinations - a 16% increase over the past seven years - and 26.5% sit leaving certificate, which is 4% increase in the past seven years, but many continue to report discrimination, bullying and racism in schools.

As an agency we do not currently collect and report on ethnicity data but we have a project in place to oversee this and expect it will be in place in 2026. Traveller families often mistrust public services, and we are seeking to promote more Traveller cultural awareness within Tusla and develop more culturally appropriate supports. We know from our engagement with the Traveller community and their representative organisations that the Traveller community has a fear of Tusla services and experiences stigma when engaging with Tusla services. This lack of trust in Tusla is a barrier for some to seeking and accessing our services in the community. Therefore, in 2023, we commissioned an independent organisation, Values Lab, to undertake a process to support the agency to understand, address and remove the barriers preventing Travellers from effectively engaging with, and deriving good outcomes from, Tusla services and supports. Learning from this is guiding our priorities for service planning and delivery. We are committed to building trust through our ongoing engagement with the Traveller community, strengthening our relationships with Traveller-led organisations, enhancing visibility and inclusion of Traveller voices in service design, and improving cultural competence among Tusla staff.

Tusla has a long-established national working group for Traveller children and families, which includes Traveller member and Traveller organisation representation. It was established initially to support co-ordination for reporting Tusla actions in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, NTRIS, 2017-2021 and contributes to NTRIS II 2024–2028, which focuses on combatting racism, delivering culturally competent public services, and supporting health, education, and family well-being. Our work is also aligned with the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030, which aims to strengthen education-related supports and our work across this area is a priority for Tusla's public sector and human rights duty programme.

Some key initiatives we hope to have the opportunity to discuss further with the committee today include our Traveller support parent programme with funding of €993,020 per year, which employs family link workers in the 17 Tusla areas to work only with Traveller parents and children. These workers are employed by local Traveller organisations and other community partners and provide culturally sensitive parenting programmes for Traveller parents with children aged between one and five.

The Tusla education support service, TESS, and the Department of Education and Youth employ 15 community link workers to improve school engagement, foster relationships between schools and Traveller families, and address educational disadvantage, with an investment of €1.25 million. More broadly, TESS has produced a five year attendance improvement plan to focus on improving the attendance of Traveller and Roma children and young people, and has an established team in place dedicated to reduced school days.

Our partnership with Traveller Families Care CLG is promoting the recruitment of Traveller foster carers so we can ensure culturally sensitive placements. With the support of a Traveller organisation, we have established a Traveller youth advisory group to ensure young Travellers now have a voice in Tusla policy.

Our student accommodation assistance fund now provides up to €6,000 per year for Traveller, Roma and care-experienced students to support access to third level education. Our employment support scheme provides financial and mentoring support for Traveller students pursuing social work and social care to increase Traveller representation in our social work and social care workforce.

To date, our multipronged approach, through strategic partnerships, targeted funding and the design and provision of more culturally sensitive services, is making meaningful strides in supporting the Traveller community. There is enhanced trust and collaboration between Tusla and Traveller organisations, increased awareness and participation in fostering among Traveller families, improved educational engagement and retention among Traveller youth and greater cultural sensitivity within Tusla through staff training and visual representation. As an agency, we are committed to further improvement in partnership with the Traveller community. We are committed to ongoing investment, listening and co-design to further build trust and deliver meaningful change, to promote the welfare and safety of children in the Traveller community, to further ensure culturally sensitive parenting support, to promote child protection and welfare mechanisms, to improve educational engagement and attainment and to ensure that if a child from the Traveller community has to come into State care, he or she can be placed with a foster family from the Traveller community. Continued collaboration with the Traveller community and Traveller-led organisations, sustained investment and interagency collaboration will be key to enable more positive outcomes for children, young people and families in the Traveller community.

Deputy John Connolly: I thank the witnesses for coming in. It was proposed last week that they would come. It was a quick response, if that was the case. I am not sure if a meeting had been planned. It is welcome that they are here and I thank them.

My first question relates to the education and welfare service. I am not sure if any of the witnesses are working directly in that area. There is a startling decrease in Traveller participation after the junior certificate. When this issue was raised previously, I was told that the education and welfare services do not work with children over the age of 16. That could be a cause of that decline. Would the witnesses think it would be beneficial if we changed the legislation to allow education and welfare officers to work with children up to the age of 18 in both the general community and the Traveller community? The percentage of children from the settled community who sit the leaving certificate is far higher than 25.6%. Would the availability of the service be of benefit in making sure that more children complete the leaving certificate?

On community link workers and the budget allocated, is there provision to expand the service? I know there is only one community link worker for Galway and Roscommon, which is quite a big geographical area with a sizeable Traveller population. With that in mind, we could benefit in that area from additional community link workers.

One of the reasons the witnesses are here today is that the National Traveller Women's Forum was before the committee last week. Its representatives spoke about the historical scepticism, which the witnesses have noted, of the Travelling community when it comes to social services. A piece of legislation in the 1960s was almost defamatory by comparison with modern language. Those representatives raised some of the issues that were included in Ms Duggan's opening statement, including the need for the ethnic identifier in line with the public duty. Are the witnesses confident that will be online this year? That would help.

There is no data concerning the number of Traveller children in care. The National Traveller Women's Forum felt that Travellers were over-represented in care settings. I am bringing that sentiment to the witnesses. Those representatives felt that Tusla was applying a lower threshold to Traveller families for referral to care settings. The suggestion was that Tusla is bringing children from the Traveller community into care settings quicker than it would children in the settled community. Do the witnesses have a response to that? It was an allegation that was made.

The Traveller women's group that was before the committee last week also highlighted an issue that I was delighted to hear raised in Ms Duggan's opening statement, which was that of kinship care. How can we promote that further? Are there barriers at the moment? Do we have figures on the number of Traveller families who are offering as foster families or who are willing to offer as foster families?

Another issue highlighted last week, and with which we are all familiar, is that trust would be enhanced if more members of the Traveller community worked with social care and social services. That has been mentioned as an objective of Tusla. How can we make it happen? Last week, Deputy McCormack asked about educational opportunities to allow Travellers to get qualifications in social care. Some scheme in Cork was mentioned. Can we roll that out further and offer it in different places? Do we have an objective to get a certain number of Travellers employed with Tusla social care? That would be a significant development and would help. I think those are all the questions I have for the moment.

Deputy George Lawlor took the Chair.

Ms Kate Duggan: I might start to respond generally and Ms O'Keeffe will come in on the Deputy's question about education support. Mr. Brophy might come in on the Deputy's question about the number of children in care, the bursary scheme and the scheme around supporting. At a high level in respect of our educational support service, by way of explanation, the operational delivery of that service sits within Tusla but is with the Department of Education and Youth from policy, funding and legislative perspectives.

I do not need to say any more than that we recognise the fear and stigma, the cultural difference and the concern among members of the Traveller community, particularly mothers, when they come to engage with our service. They are sometimes reticent to talk about domestic

violence, addiction or other troubling issues that they may be dealing with in their homes. They may be in fear of talking to public services about those issues.

The Deputy asked about the ethnic identifier. We have done the first phase of our work in that regard, which included the development of a policy and training, and how it will be used. Phase 2 will take place in 2026 and the biggest part of it will be around encouraging individuals who engage with us to identify as an ethnic minority. It might take a little more time to have certainty over the data. Tusla is lucky in that we are an organisation that now has one record per child for the whole of the agency. That will ensure that the data will be collected and reported on, but it may take a number of years to bed down and give us a total picture.

I will let Ms O'Keeffe answer on the query in respect of the education and welfare office. Mr. Brophy can answer the question about children in care and social work bursaries.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: I thank the Deputy for his great question about the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. It is now 25 years old. From our service perspective, it is timely to think about a review of the Act at this point. That is a matter of which our colleagues in the Department of education are also conscious. Our stated policy platform is retention to leaving certificate or equivalent and in that context, it warrants interrogation as to what is required as part of a broader review of the Act. That would be welcome.

On current service provision, it is important to say that education and welfare officers intervene on a statutory basis for children aged six to 16. However, our school completion programme colleagues and home school community liaison co-ordinators work with all children and young people in a school setting. Services are specifically resourced in the context of the Traveller and Roma education strategy. They are doing great work about transition. I do not know if everyone would agree, but I think we need to consider other pathways for all our children in the context of the leaving certificate and other avenues to further education, training and employment. Those services support children and young people to make those transitions. What we see in the education figures is good and successful transition into post-primary school. The next area is, as the Deputy identified, the transition to the senior cycle. That is for children in our Traveller community and children more broadly. What are we doing in that space? Just over 91% of all children sit the leaving certificate examinations. There is a discussion to be had in the context of the Education (Welfare) Act.

I will speak briefly on the community link workers. We currently have 15 such workers who are sitting within school completion programme projects. We feel that through positioning those posts in the school completion programme, the learning from those 15 workers can be rolled out through existing services to strengthen the approach through long-established services on the ground.

Ms Kate Duggan: I am conscious of the time so I will let Mr. Brophy come in with the answers to the other two questions.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: In terms of applying a lower threshold for Travellers coming into care, there is a common perception of social workers that we intervene either too early or too late. I think this may be part of the same picture. Regarding what we try to do, our model of practice in Tusla for the past four or five years has been based on a signs of safety approach whereby we work in partnership with every family. If a family can show us they can protect the child, we can work with them and set up a safety plan and the parents and members of their network

would be part of that safety plan. We will work with that family to support that child to ensure there is safety there for the child. We try to be as culturally appropriate as we can in many different situations but especially with the Travelling community.

There are, I believe, more Traveller children represented in care, but it is a matter of getting our ethnic identifier working. We are doing that in a way that is self-declaring such that we do not decide if someone is a member of the Travelling community. Rather, he or she declares that himself or herself and then we record it accurately. That will help us in the future years to plan this. We are certainly anxious not to discriminate against Traveller families in that way. We provide the maximum amount of support but we are not the only support agency. Housing and poverty are really important in this. We are working in that context.

The Deputy mentioned getting members of the Travelling community into work in social care and social work. Since 2020, we have had 19 people who have benefited from a scheme where we provide up to €5,000 a year for their support in education. We will also guarantee them when they are on that scheme a job for three years after they qualify, if they want it. We try to take a culturally appropriate approach to this whereby we try to increase the agency of these people to be in work and contribute when they are in work such that if they feel they can work in a given location, we will try to secure that for them. It is not subject to the normal numbers cap or ceilings, so it is a guarantee for those three years. At this point, we have three people who have come through that scheme working with us. We have another two people who have gone on, having done social care, to do social work. We hope over time to nurture those people to be working in our organisation over the longer period.

The Deputy mentioned kinship care and the Travelling community. Just in the past year, we have had a particular approach to this in trying to recruit members of the Travelling community for care. We have 145 members of the Travelling community who have attended information sessions over the past year, 35 have expressed an interest to go on to fostering, we have two who are now approved foster carers coming out of that process and we have two further applications in process. For a long time, we have had a project in Ballyowen Meadows where we have had families from the Travelling community come in and spend a period with support to be able to look after children. We have continued that over the years as they all extended out into the community, so we are really active in that space as well.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank Ms Duggan for her presentation. I have two questions. Mr. Brophy has kind of answered one of them but I will expand on that as we go forward.

As for my first question, in her presentation, one aspect Ms Duggan touched on was Traveller family care and the efforts to recruit Traveller foster families. A supporting document we got notes that 142 members of that community have engaged in a four-year period and only two have been approved as foster carers. Would the witnesses deem this to have been a successful exercise? What, in their view, is needed to expand the number of members of the Traveller community involved in the action? I know Mr. Brophy outlined that but he might expand on it in a moment.

As for my second question, having read Tusla's opening statement, one of the striking but not surprising things from it was the issue of a lack of trust from the Traveller community towards Tusla and the commitment of Tusla to building trust with that community. What do the witnesses say are the key barriers Tusla is encountering in fostering that trust and what have

they found successful in fostering it? Could they also roughly explain the Values Lab report of 2023? What was that about and could they expand on it a small bit?

Ms Kate Duggan: I thank the Deputy for the questions. As we have said, Mr. Brophy might expand on that in terms of the foster care. I think part of it is linked to the Deputy's second question about building trust within the agency and within the community. When I came into this job, I said at our tenth anniversary event that I had a painting in my office of a horse. In one of the first visits I did when I was in my job, I visited a particular area and a young boy came up to me and had a gift for me. He had painted a picture. He was a young boy from the Traveller community. On the back of the picture he wrote:

To Kate,

Thank you to you and Tusla for changing my life.

I talk about that because he was a member of the Travelling community and, because he got to experience a culturally sensitive placement, his life had transformed and turned around. That is the only picture in my office. In terms of our determination, it is a matter of knowing what good looks like in terms of supporting this community. As an agency, over the past four or five years, our absolute commitment has been to foster care generally. Five years ago, we were a European leader in that 90% of our children in care were in foster care. We are now down at about 87% of children in care. What we see generally is a challenge in recruiting foster carers in this country. We have put a significant amount of investment, with the support of the Government, into development of our fostering services, and a big strand of that is ensuring we can promote. As the Deputy said, those figures seem low, but for-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: When Ms Duggan says that but we hear 142 families have been interviewed or went through the process-----

Ms Kate Duggan: Yes, and only two-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: -----and only two came out of it at the end, what are the barriers? I know some will not be suitable and things will not be-----

Ms Kate Duggan: I will let Mr. Brophy talk about it.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: We see a very strong fall-off between those who express an interest in fostering and those who eventually accept it. I think there are a whole lot of reasons for that. By and large, families are really generous, both parents and children, in being open to accepting another child, but when they get to thinking about how they can actually make that happen practically speaking, a lot of people's work schedules do not work for it or they may have physical difficulties in terms of the housing. We know we are in a housing crisis. It prevents younger members of that family who may be getting married and moving out and who would normally speak and be a support for fostering from setting up their own homes. There is not the support that would normally be there. The drop-off is probably more than we would normally see from the communities generally across Ireland but not that significantly more. Given the housing crisis in the Travelling community, I think this would be reflected in that. We certainly want the rate to be higher. Every area would have a list of fostering families and would have at least one or two fostering families who are from the Travelling community in that - or maybe more - over a long period and would foster lots of children from the general community as well.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I understand that, but what barriers are there that we or the Government could sort out through intervention? The families will change and-----

Ms Kate Duggan: For us, it is obviously investment in fostering services. The financial supports that are offered to foster carers are certainly a consideration. For members of the Travelling community, there is still the stigma. We have had a number of open days and learning events, getting foster families who might be interested in fostering coming together. I think it is just going to take a bit longer. It is linked in.

Ms Jordan might give the Deputy some insight into the Values Lab report.

Ms Caroline Jordan: The context for the Values Lab report is that we have a national working group and, in 2022, the key national organisations joined our national working group to have a collaborative approach to understand the needs of Traveller children, particularly in terms of the community's key messaging to Tusla and key priorities. Those three priorities, which are outlined in the briefing document, are that there is fear, as we know, and mistrust of the services but also that there is a perception that Tusla needs to have Traveller-led cultural awareness training, we need to address racism, we need anti-discriminatory practices and we need ethnic data. The third priority was that they need more early intervention and prevention services and that we need to support the identity of children in the care of Tusla who are Traveller children. At the time, we agreed we needed to have a national work programme but we also felt we needed to hear it, apart from the national organisations, from the communities. We asked our colleagues within Tusla across our regions to come forward to say they were happy to do an undertaking with an independent consultant. Values Lab was successful in applying for that. We did regional consultations in Kerry and the south east. These included Traveller organisations, Tusla staff and members of the Traveller community.

On the basis of that, Tusla made very clear recommendations concerning the barriers that need to be overcome. Those recommendations inform our national programme of work that we will launch in November. The first barrier in respect of how we work together is about developing, promoting and implementing a set of principles to shape and govern the relationship between Tusla and Tusla-funded staff and members of the Traveller community to ensure engagement that is culturally appropriate and anti-racist. They very much felt that the Values Lab consultation could be a starting point, but we also need to create and promote safe and accessible systems and processes that allow Traveller service users and Traveller organisations to bring forward complaints and issues. Next, we need to develop supports and initiatives for Travellers and Traveller organisations to enable their understanding of Tusla and Tusla-funded services and how they should function in order to correct any misinformation and provide updates on developments in these services.

We applied for dormant accounts funding for 2023. That funding allowed us to encourage local initiatives that were collaborative in each Tusla area. These have been ongoing for the past three years and looks at promoting awareness, access and participation in Tusla services.

Ms Kate Duggan: We are very happy to share the report.

Ms Caroline Jordan: Yes.

Ms Kate Duggan: If members would like to see a copy of the report, we can share it with the committee. It is also based around storytelling. We know that members of the Traveller

community trust members of the Traveller community. What we are trying to promote in terms of having members of the Traveller community on our staff and leading out our programmes equally applies in circumstances where we can offer peer support programmes. For example, one of the things that we have done this year is employ experienced foster carers. These people work for 15 hours a week. As with the primary care workers who come from the mid-west, we have done a huge amount of work to develop a programme of peer support workers from the Traveller community to support mothers and children. We are doing the same for fostering, and we hope to have one of those groups for the Traveller community this year. Stories build trust and Travellers will trust each other if they have had a better experience with our services. We are happy to share the Values Lab report.

An Cathaoirleach: That would be excellent.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the witnesses for being here. What is the overall Tusla budget?

Ms Kate Duggan: I am delighted to say that in 2026 it will be €1.3 billion.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: What proportion of the €1.3 billion is set aside for ethnic minorities, Travellers and Roma?

Ms Kate Duggan: It is important to say that two thirds of our budget covers the cost of placements across the agency. Where members of the Traveller community are in foster care or residential care, we do not break down the figures because we do not have ethnic data. In the context of all of the services that we provide, including family supports, social work and social care, we do not break that down because we do not have ethnic data. We spend about €4 million a year on Traveller-specific programmes that are similar to the programmes we just talked about, namely the bursary and employment schemes and educational support services. These are targeted towards the Traveller community. I cannot break down the figures without the ethnic data.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I recognise the work done by Tusla and thank the witnesses for attending. It is hard to believe that this is the first time the chief executive has appeared before this committee. Our vision is to support the Traveller community and ethnic minorities, and that is why I ask my questions in a certain way. A figure of 4% was mentioned.

Ms Kate Duggan: It is important to point out that it is a dedicated 4%.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Yes, it is 4% of dedicated and ring-fenced funding out of €1.3 billion. Having seen the statistics on the number of young people from Traveller families who are in care or in the need of care, I have to ask the following questions. How much of the €4 million is spent on preventing families or children going into the system of care or residential care? What is the €4 million spent on? Is it spent on education or prevention?

Ms Kate Duggan: That €4 million would cut across the types of initiatives to which we referred in our briefing material and opening statement. It is spent across our dedicated educational support service programmes, the family link workers in the 17 areas, the fostering programme for Travellers and a bursary scheme. On where the funding is dedicated, Foróige in Rathkeale, for example, gets a certain amount of money, as do different projects across the country. Where we have provided laptop education, there is a whole breakdown. The €4

million is a dedicated ring-fenced budget. It includes dormant accounts funding and more mainstream funding.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Dormant accounts funding is not permanent.

Ms Kate Duggan: No. It is initiatives.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Initiatives.

Ms Kate Duggan: Yes.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I am talking about the permanent funding line.

Ms Kate Duggan: Again, that is the targeted funding line. On the permanent funding line, and I have just mentioned it, two thirds of our budget relates to placement costs.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I hear Ms Duggan.

Ms Kate Duggan: If a member of the Traveller community needs to go into foster care or residential care, that is covered in the main.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I totally understand. I want to hear about prevention.

Ms Kate Duggan: The €4 million funding is based around prevention and universal supports. About €671,000 is spent on aftercare. That relates to children in the Traveller community who have been in care-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Yes, I know.

Ms Kate Duggan: -----and are out of care. I estimate that probably about €2 million goes on prevention.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: All right. Where is the strategy within Tusla for prevention? If we do not target prevention, we cannot reduce the number of the 6% of children who are in residential, respite or foster care. Funding has gone from 4% of the budget to 2% of €1.3 billion is being spent on care for an ethnic minority grouping to prevent them entering the care system.

Ms Kate Duggan: Again, it is really difficult to talk in figures because we do not have the ethnic data. I absolutely agree-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is part of the point, is it not?

Ms Kate Duggan: Yes.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: We do not have the data.

Ms Kate Duggan: No. That is part of the challenge in answering the questions on data. I reiterate that, more broadly, Tusla is about to hit 105,000 referrals this year.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Yes.

Ms Kate Duggan: About 65% of those will be referrals relating to welfare concerns. They will not be on foot of concerns in respect of our child protection or care system. We have strengthened our family support and early intervention services in the 17 Tusla areas. All of those services are open to members of the Traveller community. Regardless of whether they are services that are parent led, services for children, family resource centres, homework clubs

or school clubs, members of the Traveller community can access them. We recognise that sometimes Travellers do not want to access them and that there is a stigma around their accessing them. That is why we have some dedicated funding.

As we said, the family link workers only work with Traveller families that have children under five years of age. The object is to try to support parenting capacity, support early intervention and ensure that those units and family units can stay together and there are not welfare or protection concerns.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I am sorry, but I prefer to go over and back with witnesses.

Ms Kate Duggan: That is okay. I wish I could be very clear and have the data for-----.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I know that. Believe it or not, by being unclear, Ms Duggan is actually being very clear. The thing is that I am on the clock all the time.

I know the answer about the money. Ms Duggan has told me that a certain amount of funding targets children under five years of age from the point of view of prevention. I see that €1.2 million is being spent on tests and everything else on the educational side. How can we grow the confidence to break down the fear if we have not expanded the budget because we have older or more established families? Targeting those under five is not the way to go in the Traveller community because of the fear, mistrust and racism that exist. While I applaud what Tusla tries to do, I do not think it is expansionary enough to capture more in order to prevent people falling into trouble. In the context of addiction-----

Ms Kate Duggan: Suicide.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: -----suicide and how a family can fall apart quite easily following a traumatic event-----

Ms Kate Duggan: Yes.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: -----when Tusla only targets children under five years of age, a huge proportion are left behind.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: A lot of that is about integrated working.

A number of us were at an event last week in Exchange House. We talked about how we can combine our agencies' work to support families in interfamilial conflict and how we can increase that discussion with the Traveller community. There were significant numbers from the Traveller community who were talking about their experience and how we as State agencies needed to up our cultural game in terms of understanding what that is and be more trauma-informed for those families. It is important we continue that wide engagement across the Traveller organisations. Ms Jordan described that earlier with regards to Pavee Point. We have had significant representations from the Traveller community informing our strategies so we can hear what they want and what is important to them and so we can communicate to them what we are doing. A simple example is a person we had employed and was supported in college and had a placement with us. At the end of that placement, they came to us and said they had not realised all that Tusla is doing and the amount of support it provides. It is brilliant for us that she can go back to her family and community and talk about that. It is that type of engagement we need. We are providing more culturally sensitive services and members of the Traveller community are beginning to understand Tusla is able to provide that and wants to.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Can the witnesses talk about the reform taking place within Tusla at the moment? How are they ensuring the reform within Tusla combining social work and family support includes good knowledge and understanding? Actually, we are protecting our social workers from burnout because now we are expecting more of them. I do not think this reform is being received positively, from what I am hearing; tell me if I am wrong. We are expecting social workers to widen their caseloads and take on more groupings. I hear the word used there - "integrated" - but have we given the training and support the social workers will need? They are now family support practitioners and social workers. We are expecting everything of them. Who slips through the cracks when this is happening?

Ms Kate Duggan: When we set about this reform programme, there were a number of things as rationale behind it. The first thing, most importantly, was that children were slipping between the cracks. Children were slipping between services. When I first came to Tusla, I heard so many people say they were getting letters back using the term "does not meet the threshold" and they did not know where to go. We saw an agency where 60% to 65% of referrals were looking for family support and early intervention. They were being assessed and screened from a child protection response perspective. It creates mistrust and stigma when families think they are in a child protection service when what they actually want is a support service. What the reform has been about has been, first, standing up 30 areas in Tusla, for example, recognising areas were too big in terms of geographical patches. Some social work teams were holding all the risk. What we will have now, for the first time ever, is one record for every child. We will have one point of screening in every network, so if a family knock on a Tusla door, they will for the first time be able to ask for a support or a welfare service, if that is what is needed as a public health nurse or as a parent. They will be able to ask for a meitheal, where we can bring in families who need support from the HSE, from Tusla or from wider agencies, or you can look at the mandated person for child protection.

We know over 50% of our cases were closing when they should not have been closing and should have been going to a different service. They will now come in to one point and will be screened. We are standing up 90 early intervention and family support teams. It is important to say that children who need a family support and early intervention referral will be seen by family support workers, social care workers and family support practitioners across the community. Where a child needs a child protection response, they will be seen by a social worker. Social workers working in fostering will still be working in fostering. Social workers who work with children in care will still be working with children in care. Mr. Brophy is our chief social worker. He has been sitting on the implementation programme. We believe this reform is going to make sure children are seen sooner, that they will be screened sooner and that they are assigned to the right response pathway. For the first time ever, when they are diverted or referred on to a service within the community, like Barnardos or one of our funded agencies, we will be looking at the impact of that intervention so children do not fall between the cracks. We recognise children need to get earlier access to services. To support this programme, there has been training, there is the single record and, most importantly, the apprenticeship scheme for social workers, and I was delighted to be present with Senator Rabbitte when we launched that. We are now seeing, for the first time within the agency, an increased supply of social workers and an increase in the retention of social workers in the agency.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Tusla had the opportunity to capture the single-point data. Congratulations. Why did we then not break it down to ethnicity?

Ms Kate Duggan: I will let Mr. Brophy talk about it. We needed the digital system. We have that now.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I am glad, because four or five years ago they were using paper and did not even have a laptop going into the field. I welcome that, but for the purpose of this committee-----

Mr. Gerard Brophy: We have to be really careful. We want to have best practice. Some organisations already have that best practice in place. We have learned from that. We had to do a data protection impact assessment on it. We had to talk to the Traveller community we work with. We also need to be sure we train our own workers so that, when they record ethnicity, they do so at the person's choice. If you ask somebody what ethnicity they are, it could be double Dutch to some people. It is about explaining what the choices are and why we want to record it and retain that information. People may well make the choice that they do not want us not to record anything about them because they are afraid they are going to be discriminated against if they are recorded as a Traveller. In our previous systems we had the ability to record nationality and some ethnicity, but we found it was not reliable because someone might select an ethnicity for somebody which they may not be happy with. We have taken a very careful approach to this. We want to roll this out with training. Some organisations have done this very successfully and have really useful data coming forward.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: It has been a very useful session following on from the session last week with the National Traveller Women's Forum and addressing some of the issues, particularly around ethnicity.

I find in our community in Kilkenny that there seems to be a very disparate approach in terms of who is leading on Traveller development work. At times, across the country, that disparate aspect is leading to different outcomes or different approaches, whether it is the local development companies, family resource centres, or the local authorities. I feel there is a handwashing of responsibility at times. I am interested to know Tusla's experience of that inconsistency of approach which can sometimes lead to an inconsistency in terms of programmes. There is a lot of stop-starting of programmes and a lot of pilot programmes. Sometimes families can be inundated with programmes and find it confusing. I am keen to know the witnesses' views on that approach at local level.

Ms Kate Duggan: I will let Mr. Brophy, Ms Jordan or Ms O'Keeffe, from an education perspective, come in if the Senator has any specific questions on it. One of the challenges we all face as a public service is we get funding for pilot schemes, we get funding though the Dormant Accounts Fund, and we get funding in a way that sometimes drives that short-term, immediate response. That can be done in a way that works across different agencies, one agency maybe not knowing what another agency has and, as the Senator said, parents maybe being offered three programmes this week and nothing the next week or next year. Certainly, one of the approaches we support, and certainly in the child poverty unit in the Department of the Taoiseach it is something they are really trying to promote, is a move towards more multi-annual funding of programmes and programmes that are jointly commissioned across services. They are doing a lot of work at the moment in terms of mapping the types of supports going

into areas in response to children in particular. We are certainly trying to work more in co-ordination with colleagues through the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, which is a whole-of-government and national approach. We want our actions to be aligned to it but also aligned and integrated with those of other public services. That is an ambition we are trying to look at, because we need to look at where money is going in across agencies, whether it is being used for the right purposes and how we are looking at that from a multi-agency perspective.

It is more about long-term, multi-annual funding and that kind of integrated approach to commissioning certainly being the longer term solution. Ms Jordan may have specific examples.

Ms Caroline Jordan: The committee will probably be aware of the children and young people's services committees, CYPSCs. A lot of work is happening across those committees. I got data from our national office to say that, currently, of all of the CYPSCs, there is Traveller enrolment organisation engaged in the structure. It is also very much a needs analysis approach. They have children and young people's plans every three years. Where there is a need for an integrated, co-ordinated approach with statutory agencies on that committee, plans are then put in place. Twenty-three of those CYPSCs have responses to the needs of Traveller and Roma children, young people and families. They are tracking to make sure all those children and young people's plans have children's and young people's voices and the community's voices in them. We support that very much. We lead that work but it is very much a piece of work that is based on need but also participation. That is up to age 24. If we were able to drill into that work a bit more, I think there is some learning in terms of how those needs analyses have been addressed. That is a key bit, that we use the implementation structures we have. I do agree, though, that with NTRIS II, there are particular actions for children and young people that Tusla has actions on and then there would be the Department of education and others. There is a piece around identifying the needs of children and making sure it is really co-ordinated well, but we have to think about the family approach.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Yes, it is that family approach and the wraparound services-----

Ms Caroline Jordan: It has to be the family approach-----

Senator Malcolm Noonan: -----and a consistency of approach that I find is quite frustrating for people. Then again, the other issue and a chronic challenge with youth work we encounter routinely from meeting with Youth Work Ireland is the inability to even recruit workers because of pay within the sector. That, in itself, is having a knock-on effect. I know a lot of youth organisations across the country are doing really valuable work with Traveller young people. Yet it is very frustrating to see that there is not a consistency there and the sector itself is in quite a lot of trouble.

Going back to that wraparound family support, I feel there is a very slow response at times to immediate child welfare issues. This was borne out by the witnesses we had last week from the National Traveller Women's Forum. In some cases, they may be resolved by an immediate rehousing solution to address an issue. It is about that lack of an emergency response when a very clear challenge is there with a child welfare issue. Would the witnesses have a comment specifically on that aspect?

Ms Kate Duggan: I might let Mr. Brophy answer that in terms of the practice.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: Again, Tusla provides support for family resource centres. We are very much on the ground and a lot of family support is provided. We do depend on other agencies to work with us. In that instance, and it is a good example the Senator gave, where a family might have a particular difficulty, maybe due to a housing situation, which itself may be a conflict with a neighbour, it is just not working out for them or they are too far from school, they cannot get to school or they have an issue with transport, we do depend on, let us say, the local authorities to work with us in that. Sometimes that works, but it is about the network and having it more integrated, and this goes back to the Senator's previous question about having consistent support. When I look back on support for the Travelling community over, let us say, my lifetime in social work, it has certainly increased. We are not yet, however, at a level whereby we can have consistent approaches across all the services together. It is certainly improving but we need to develop more of that. I think our approach to it has been to talk to the Travelling community first and having a really embedded approach with the Travelling community to hear their voices and see what will work for them. I think that is the first step. If other agencies adopted that approach, that would help as well.

The other thing is that we are not dependent necessarily on the Dormant Accounts Fund coming in for that. For example, we had the NTRIS employment support scheme started before the Dormant Accounts Fund came in, so as an agency, we have been committed to that over a period of time and we would see us as retaining that commitment long after the Dormant Accounts Fund. I think that is really important for consistency. The same is true for family support. When we have family support workers there, we find it much more effective with the Travelling community, particularly in some parts of the country, for a woman who has experience in the Travelling community and has lived in the Travelling community to go in and provide that family support. They get a much better reception, they are listened to, and it is actually really positive for other services that we are involved with if we can provide that support, because it is a door into that community. Again, we want to extend those efforts, be more culturally appropriate and have it in a way that is easily received by the Travelling community. It is not something we can solve alone, however. Like a lot of these problems, it does depend on the other agencies coming in alongside us as well.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Are there specific programmes for breastfeeding support for Traveller women? I know the breastfeeding rates among Traveller women are very low, and low nationally and generally, but are there specific programmes there in relation to that?

Ms Kate Duggan: No, I do not have anything very specific on breastfeeding here. I know some of those would be run through the HSE through its public health nursing and lactation service and some could be run as well in terms of family resource centres. I can certainly check, but I would think it is more through the HSE because it would be public health nurses and lactation consultants who would be running those programmes.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the team from Tusla for coming in today and for the opening statement. It is disappointing the data we require is not being taken or the witnesses do not have it. Data is power, and when we are dealing with an ethnic minority group like Travellers, the more data we have, the more specific programmes we can put in place because we will know exactly where to target. I hear the witnesses that this is something they will be working on in the future. What specific steps is Tusla taking to build trust and improve engagement with Traveller families given the long-standing concerns the witnesses mentioned

about the fear of child removal and a lack of cultural understanding within the child protection services? If we look at that and then we go on to representation and cultural competence, can Tusla outline how many Traveller representatives or culturally competent staff are currently employed within the child protection and family support teams? What measures are in place to ensure staff receive ongoing cultural awareness training? What targeted early interventions and family support initiatives are being delivered specifically for Traveller families to prevent crises and reduce the need for child protection interventions?

Ms Kate Duggan: I hope we have set out somewhat already the improving trust and confidence. We are going to share the Values Lab report with the committee. We have the action plan out of that and what Travellers told us they need in terms of building trust and confidence, which is the youth Traveller-----

Deputy Tony McCormack: Just to intervene, we had representatives in from the National Traveller Women's Forum organisation last week. They spoke to us about the fact that it was very hard for them to have any trust in some cases, with child protection and what have you. What specific interventions is Tusla making in that regard or what processes or procedures are coming online that will actually make a difference?

Ms Kate Duggan: Mr. Brophy will perhaps go into it in detail. One of the things we have set out is making sure, first of all, that our staff have, as the Deputy described, that cultural awareness and training completed, and we can talk to that in terms of their engagement-----

Deputy Tony McCormack: Does Tusla have any Traveller people working in the organisation?

Ms Kate Duggan: Yes, we do. I will let Mr. Brophy go through the details again in terms of the approach to this aspect.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: I did refer to that earlier. In some parts of the country, we do have family support workers recruited from the Travelling community who can work with the Travelling community. I referred earlier to the education supports we have as well, where we do want to get in more people from the Travelling community and support them through education to be social care educated or to be social work educated. We have four people who have come through that scheme. We have other people who are members of the Travelling community who work with us as well, but we do not have a number on that. Again, it is not something we have. Going back to what our own organisations do, because again people may not want to self-declare, that is certainly something we can look at into the future in terms of employees.

Deputy Tony McCormack: What I am getting from Mr. Brophy is that it is a low number.

Ms Kate Duggan: Yes, it is.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: It is, absolutely, and we would want to grow it.

Deputy Tony McCormack: To be honest, to deal with this aspect and to make sure people begin to trust in the systems we have, in Tusla, other organisations and groups like it, we need to bring in more Travellers. We need to sit down with the Traveller organisations and say this is where we are going to have vacancies for jobs and we need Traveller people to do courses.

Last week we were talking about courses Travellers were doing. It was great they got a diploma, but they need to get a job from that and only some of them got work from it. Tusla needs to sit down with the Traveller organisations and talk to them and tell them where it has positions available.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: We have done that. We are working really closely with Traveller organisations to let them know we have this scheme in operation, so if someone is interested in applying for social care or social work we will support them. We work with the inclusion office in the university so it is aware of it and can provide support allied to that. We will then provide them with a work placement over the summer where they can earn some money. Again, that is additional to this and they will get good experience, which is key when they come to work. Then we will guarantee them a job for the three years after it. In guaranteeing that job we are not just saying the person is going to work here, there or yonder; it is a dialogue with the person who has just qualified. They may not want to work near their home. They may want to work somewhere a little further away because they have more of a sense of being comfortable with that. They can develop their own agency and empower themselves to develop as a worker in that way. We are trying to be really culturally appropriate in that. One of the things we are hearing back from Traveller organisations is that a lot of people in the Traveller community have trauma from their experience of racism or their experience with the State services, and we are really conscious of that. We try to put up our hand and say we are aware and conscious of that, and that we want to see what will help and to support people to stay in work so we can grow that workforce.

Ms Kate Duggan: It is important to say our family link workers are all members of the Travelling community and employed through Traveller organisations. That is a really important initiative because if we get in with families with those younger children earlier, the trust starts to build from a very early age with those families. Ms O'Keeffe has something on how it is within education.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: On the community link workers we spoke about earlier, we are in the process of recruiting those posts and we have negotiated we will take part-time hours, look at different hours of the day and days of the week to ensure we are making the job doable by the broadest range of people at community level. One of our national co-ordinators who is co-ordinating all that is from the Travelling community herself. Those are the inroads we make in terms of those proper ongoing connections with the community.

Deputy Tony McCormack: To add to that, has Tusla put a bursary in place or is there help and support available for people from the Traveller community who want to do that course?

Ms Kate Duggan: We fund that.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Brilliant. What targeted early intervention and family support initiatives are being delivered specifically for Traveller families to prevent crises and reduce the need for child protection interventions?

Ms Kate Duggan: It is primarily the dedicated family link workers we have already spoken about. They are dedicated and are across every one of Tusla's 17 areas. It is about parenting supports and very much about new mums, parent supports, cooking capacity, parenting capacity and really supporting them to be good parents, to be able to look after their children and feel confident in looking after their children. As Ms Jordan said, through the CYPSC

programmes Tusla leads across all the geographic areas of the country there are lots of programmes that are targeted where there has been a needs assessment done. It is back to Senator Byrne's observation that sometimes it is different programmes in different parts of the country because of what the identified need is within that area.

What we want to do more than anything is ensure Traveller parents engage with our wider services because there is a huge range of services available through early intervention and family support. If we look back on last year's figures, there were over 96,500 referrals into Tusla and there may have been about 600 admissions to care. Tusla responds to maybe 90,000 children and families where the question is not about taking the children into care but responding in terms of early intervention and family support. We want Traveller families to feel confident to engage with those services. It goes wider. The real concern, when we talk to members of the Traveller community or some of the staff who work with us is domestic violence, mental health and suicidal ideation. It is the huge concerns they have about talking about issues and it is trying to work with them through the likes of CYPSC initiatives and in consultation with some of the programmes with the HSE or through the family resource centres to get that early intervention in terms of just open and honest conversations and trusting public services.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank everyone from Tusla for being here. I apologise as I am also on the public accounts committee so I am in and out a little bit. I thank the officials for all the work they do. From the opening statement, it is obvious there is a lot of good work being done and also an acknowledgment of the marginalisation issue within the Traveller community. It is welcome to see that level of sincerity and acknowledgement of the work that is needed as a society in relation to the Traveller community.

Education is the key thing. There have been some improvements made there in the percentage going on to do the junior certificate and so on. That is welcome but the progress is limited. It is going in the right direction but it is slow. I want to focus on the community link worker programme and the education support service. I think Tusla has 15 in place at present.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: That is correct. We have 15 full-time equivalent posts that are currently in recruitment. Six are now recruited and the rest are in active recruitment. There are possibly panels sitting today. As I said, to make those posts as attractive as can be and to fit the different mix of people we want to come into those posts, we have made them part-time where that has been helpful, we have split posts and we have looked at different hours of the day and days of the week. I am very hopeful we will have all those posts recruited in the coming weeks.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Is this a relatively new initiative? It is.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: It speaks to Senator Noonan's point. We had the STAR programmes under the first NTRIS, which ran from 2019 onwards. The learnings from those have now been brought forward into the Traveller and Roma education strategy. What we have done, working with the Department of Education and Youth, is scale all that learning and to build on what we understood as that great model where you have school, you have the TESS, home-school, SCP and DEIS, EWOs and then you have our connection with the Traveller and Roma communities through what are now the link workers. We are taking what was really powerful, worked well

and was effective the first time around and scaling that not just to DEIS but more broadly across communities where there are Travellers who need to be knitted into that school community.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Okay. Tusla is trying to improve the model, the operation and the effectiveness.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: Yes.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Picking up on Deputy McCormack's point, the agency intends for some of these community link workers to come from the Travelling communities. Is that correct?

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: Yes, and of those appointed the vast majority are from a Traveller or Roma ethnic background.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: That is very good. It reinforces the point about the power of education. The key point is Tusla is empowering and enabling the Travelling community. It is not about handing out supports but about enabling members of the community to improve their own position in society. You cannot beat the power of enabling people to be able to do that themselves. I commend the agency on that work. It is great to see it scaling up and being modified to try to be as effective as possible. Bringing in members of the community to work with the community as a whole is very important.

My final point is on Tusla's budget. It has come across that there is a need for probably greater certainty, regularity and consistency in the funding so the agency can plan. That is critically important and a message we need to take back as a committee. There is great work being done but if Tusla is relying on *ad hoc* funding and various initiatives that is not good enough for it as an organisation in terms of its work programme, trying to plan for the future and trying to continually improve what it does. That is certainly something we need to take back. I thank the officials.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Deputy. Did Senator Rabbitte want to come in on a second round?

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I would love to.

An Cathaoirleach: We have some time. I will be stricter on time the second time around.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: All right Chair. I will need straight answers then, if that is okay.

The first question concerns how many children receive the student accommodation assistance fund.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: A total of 19 have through of which three are in employment so the number is down to 16. Sorry - the number is 15.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Is that in 2025?

Mr. Gerard Brophy: That is in 2025. That is my understanding of it but, again, I can get more accurate figures and come back to the Senator.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is a straight answer. How many are in receipt of funding under the employment support scheme?

Mr. Gerard Brophy: That was what I answered in the previous question. That employment support scheme includes that pathway through college-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: It is the same people.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: -----and then into work. They are guaranteed those three years of work.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Is this the scheme in Cork? Is that to do with the social work scheme?

Mr. Gerard Brophy: The scheme in Cork to which the Senator is referring is probably the apprenticeship. We introduced the apprenticeship two years ago. The apprenticeship means that somebody can be employed by Tusla-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: How many?

Ms Kate Duggan: On the apprenticeship scheme?

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Yes.

Ms Kate Duggan: For the Traveller community or generally?

Senator Anne Rabbitte: For the Traveller community.

Ms Kate Duggan: I do not have that data.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: We would not have that data. They are not necessarily included. That is not a specific support scheme for the Traveller community.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: It is for all.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: It is for all.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: But the whole purpose would be to include or entice people with the lived experience and that is another model way in. How many are on it?

Ms Kate Duggan: We would not have that. We do not collate that information.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is not the fault of Tusla but it is a missed opportunity. The expansion of that scheme was discussed here last week. If we are to attract people from the Traveller community, they might not be able to afford the accommodation or to travel. There was talk about other technological universities such as Limerick. One of our colleagues also mentioned Galway. The spreading out of it to ensure we could get a more diverse inclusion in the apprenticeship scheme was mentioned.

Ms Kate Duggan: Does the Senator want the numbers on the apprenticeship scheme generally?

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The witnesses told me it was 20.

Ms Kate Duggan: General.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: We have 125. We had 75 last year and 50 the year before. There are 125 coming through Cork.

Ms Kate Duggan: They are not from the Traveller community. The other scheme is targeted at the Traveller community but not through that apprenticeship scheme.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I totally understand. How many of the 245 foster carers who were approved in 2024 were from the Traveller community?

Mr. Gerard Brophy: I think we said two - coming through that specific campaign.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: It is very disproportionate when one looks at it.

Ms Kate Duggan: It is.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: There are lots of challenges to any family taking on foster care. I take this opportunity to thank our foster carers for reaching out. It is a really difficult job emotionally and physically because they need space and it involves including someone else in their families.

Ms Kate Duggan: To give reassurance even as part of this, I attended an event in Kildare last year that was led by the Traveller and Roma families with our link workers who are working in fostering services. Members of the Traveller and Roma community from across the country came to celebrate fostering, talk about its importance and answer questions about fostering. It will take time but it is something we are focused on trying to do in lots of different ways through the employment of people from the Traveller community, the peer support workers and having events like that are almost a way for the community to come together to build trust and relationships with Tusla.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Something has changed because the Traveller community was really good at supporting each other. What has changed? Have it become too formal and bureaucratic? When we talk about Tusla, we talk about regulation - no disrespect but the witnesses know what I mean. They tick the boxes; that is it. There is nothing wrong with it. I am not saying anything like that. That is how it is. Something has changed within the Traveller community because it is very proud of looking after its own. What has changed within the system such that the Traveller community does not feel part of it?

Mr. Gerard Brophy: Those two approvals are for general foster care. If a child comes in looking for foster care, these are generally approved, they can take any child and there will be specific age groups. Both generally and in respect of the Traveller community, we look for kinship care if we can. If we have a child who needs to come into care, we will look to the uncles, aunts and other members of the extended family such as grandparents. A lot more children are accommodated through that possibly but, again, we do not have data on it. This is something we need to do and we will do it over the next five years because those foster carers will be on our TCM system. We are just at the point where the foster care is on TCM. We have had child protection and welfare on it for a while foster care has come on to it in the past year. We are in a better position where we will be able to plan for the future.

The Senator is right. Part of the difficulty is Garda vetting. Garda vetting is really important for anyone who is caring for a child and who is not a mother or father. Sometimes members of the Traveller community can be reluctant to get involved in that process but, again, we work with that the same as we do with the rest of the community and that works out but it is an added difficulty.

Ms Kate Duggan: Informal kinship care is happening all of the time. That is where Tusla is not involved. We are not involved, there is no social work oversight and there is no HIQA oversight of the placement. This is happening every day of the week in Traveller communities across the country where grandmothers, aunts and uncles are stepping up and taking on care. Kinship Care Day happened last week. From a kinship care perspective, we are engaged with the Department in looking for a policy basis on which to move forward in terms of kinship care. It is where we look at kinship care as a model and one that works, is appropriate and is supported.

Foster care is under a different arrangement in terms of inspections, regulation by HIQA and oversight of social work practice. If we are very honest, that is the bit with which members of the Traveller community are slower to engage.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: There is an opportunity there-----

Ms Kate Duggan: Particularly through kinship care-----

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is what I was going to say - through the kinship care piece. That speaks to tradition and family.

Deputy John Connolly: Regarding the small number coming through the system providing foster care, is there a particular challenge around locating care in emergencies?

Ms Kate Duggan: Is that in the agency or with the Traveller community?

Deputy John Connolly: In the agency. HIQA might suggest that there is a higher proportion of Traveller children in the care setting. Is there a particular challenge in finding emergency care?

Ms Kate Duggan: We have a challenge in the agency in finding emergency placements. We have been very open about the fact that we have had to use unregulated emergency placements at times. When we talk about emergency placements, that can be An Garda Síochána in the middle of the night having to invoke a section 12 because children are in danger and children being removed from their home in a Garda car in the middle of the night and brought to our out-of-hours service. An immediate place of safety has to be found for them. There was a history of where they may have been left in Garda stations or hospitals. This is something we have not had and is not something we want for children and young people. In terms of the demand on our services more broadly, there is mainstream demand and anything up to 100 young people from the separated children seeking international protection service and turning up at our offices per month. These are unaccompanied minors.

Deputy John Connolly: Is that 100 per month?

Ms Kate Duggan: It is about 100 per month. We spoke about this previously. To date this year, 547 new referrals have presented at our offices so that is up about 13% on the same period last year. At the end of August, and it has since increased, 528 young people in the care of Tusla were separated children. That is up 34% on last year. It is a new demand we did not really have two or three years ago. They must all be given an emergency place of safety. We will be appearing before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration next week and are looking forward to that opportunity in respect of the EU migration

pact. Under the law, age determination is the responsibility of the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and the International Protection Office.

If a young person claims to be a minor or under 19, or is perceived to be, he or she is presented to our staff to determine whether he or she is eligible for services for under-18s. There is a principle of equity. We are challenged with our emergency placements. In one week, we could have 20 new young people to be accommodated on top of those who were taken in through section 12 or through significant breakdowns.

Deputy John Connolly: I will slightly change the topic, if the Chair does not mind. One of the anecdotal experiences I have is that the first experience of the education system for Traveller children is the mainstream primary school. They often do not engage in preschool or childcare services prior to that. Is Tusla making specific efforts to try to promote this? Traveller families participate in the ECCE and other schemes. Are there Traveller-specific childcare facilities in the country? I would be more interested in finding out about the effort to try to encourage families.

Ms Kate Duggan: I am not aware of a Traveller-specific childcare scheme.

Deputy John Connolly: Or a facility. It can be a community club.

Ms Kate Duggan: I hate to mislead the Deputy. I am genuinely not aware.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: Approximately 76% of Traveller children are engaging in the ECCE.

Deputy John Connolly: Okay.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: It is still below the general population, but it is a good start. It is in the DEIS setting only, but it has good coverage. We are looking at home school community liaisons as a connection to early start in order to link with the primary school the children will be attending. Our vision is to get to the point where they do the transition from pre to primary school proper and, as referenced earlier, are supported in the transition at every stage, for example, sixth class, junior cycle and senior cycle. For Traveller and Roma children, and for all children, we know those are the key points, but 76% is a strong start to build on.

Deputy John Connolly: Did Ms O'Keeffe mention a home school liaison?

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: Home school liaisons are already doing that work.

Deputy John Connolly: Is that school staff and teachers?

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: Those are teachers seconded to us for a period of five years, so they remain with their schools. It is an incredible connection because they bring that learning back into their staff teams.

Deputy John Connolly: Is that DEIS schools only?

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: That is DEIS only at the moment except for - this is important for the committee - 12 home school liaisons on our team who are working in non-DEIS schools with high Traveller enrolments. We have had significant success in that community engagement through the person going to the children's homes and spending time connecting them in.

Deputy John Connolly: May we get those 12 locations?

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: I do not have them off the top of my head, but I am happy to share.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Over the past months, we have consistently dealt with the issue of suicide rates among the Traveller community. I know the main role in suicide prevention lies with the National Office of Suicide Prevention, NOSP, and the HSE. Does Tusla have a role in training social workers in culturally appropriate interventions, from a postvention point of view where there has been a suicide event in a Traveller community or family, and signposting culturally appropriate counselling services for families affected by suicide?

Ms Kate Duggan: I might let Mr. Brophy talk about training for social workers and Ms Jordan about the particular programmes that are there. As the Senator said, the services lie with the HSE, but through our family resource centres programme, we fund a number of FRCs that offer counselling supports. Through CYPSCs, there are a number of initiatives targeting youth mental health in the Traveller community. I know that has been identified in areas. Where there are high incidences in particular communities, the CYPSCs respond to that.

Ms Caroline Jordan: We fund counselling organisations to provide therapeutic support to the Traveller community. Mr. Brophy mentioned we had an engagement with Exchange House Ireland last week. We are aware we need to promote the Traveller counselling service and the Traveller mediation service. We can be allies in that space and can work together.

Mr. Gerard Brophy: Regarding CYPSCs' responses over the years, there is a good mobilisation of the services in the area if a tragedy or something happens. Generally, the CYPSCs have adopted a plan for what they will do when that happens. There is a mobilisation of local services to respond. Social workers have participated in specific training about suicide. ASIST is important in that. It is about being able to sit down to have a conversation with somebody to identify what the risk is. That is prevention, but it is about having that knowledge and being able to share it with the other organisations around. We are keenly aware of that, and working with other agencies is particularly important in those situations.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Yes. Sometimes, postvention after a suicide event is equally important because there are possible contagion issues if someone has died by suicide. That culturally important training in the context of suicide prevention is important.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I have a question on local authorities. They obviously have a substantial role to play in accommodation provision. How does Tusla find them in reacting or responding to issues? Does it have much interaction with them in the area of Traveller accommodation? The witnesses probably come across issues where there has to be an emergency response to something or there has to be a fast reaction from a local authority. How do the witnesses find them in general?

Mr. Gerard Brophy: It probably depends on the local authority. Some local authorities are excellent and some are probably slower. Some have employed particular staff who deal with these issues and have a method and system of responding whereas others do not. Sometimes, it can depend on the resources the council has at the time. It is a bit hit and miss. The approach we have adopted is to try to consult with the Traveller organisations and build our services from the base up. That approach would be worthwhile across all services in the country.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Has Tusla ever engaged with local authorities to get them to improve? Is it a question of scale? Is it as simple as the bigger local authorities having more resources and, therefore, being better able?

Mr. Gerard Brophy: Some of it is that. However, let us say an area manager in the mid-west engages with Limerick City and County Council or Clare County Council, which could have excellent programmes in place that are really effective and respond quickly. It is not always about a quick response, but they would certainly be able to provide an emergency response for a family or child, particularly in times of conflict or specific deprivation. Those are really good examples of where that happens, but I could not speak to the consistency.

An Cathaoirleach: I appreciate that Deputy Rice was late joining us. Would he like to contribute?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Yes. I apologise, as I was hosting a briefing on dyslexia.

One issue that may already have been touched on is that of reduced school hours. I saw a concerning piece from *The Journal Investigates* about the disproportionate impact of reduced school hours on Traveller children. I flag my concerns there. I note that there were concerns from Ms Anne Burke, chairperson of the Cork Traveller education unit, saying that there were "several forms of exclusion" that Traveller children face in schools." She noted that Traveller children were often on reduced hours and there were issues with resources. This has an impact and there is a need to implement the Traveller and Roma education strategy. There is also a need for teacher training. I note that parents also talk about their experiences of being traumatised in the education system. This is aside from *The Journal* piece. A Traveller man said he felt coerced to put his little girl on a reduced timetable. Some of the reports there are quite concerning. There are concerns about it not being used appropriately, and this is one of the concerns laid out.

Similarly, a report from the Limerick Traveller Network found 9.7% of children in a study of 150 children were on reduced timetables. That is a significant number of Traveller children on reduced time at school, and it has a real impact on children. The report cites additional research and a child talking about how the school made the child feel slow. It shows the education system can have a damaging impact on children's self-worth and confidence. The impact there is concerning and alarming. We know the long-term impact this has on children and their engagement with education and the impact that has on people's life outcomes. I note my concerns in that area.

I am interested in the response if the witnesses have any additional thoughts on it but we may have covered this ground already.

Ms Kate Duggan: Ms O'Keeffe can talk to that in terms of reduced school days.

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: The Tusla education support service is responsible for receiving the notification with regard to reduced school days. In the last published report, which is published by the Department of education, there were 1,275 children in general on a reduced school day in that school year. Of those, 79 were from the Traveller community. I have not had an opportunity to read the article in *The Journal,* but it is really important that we receive notifications of every instance of use of a reduced school day. Based on the numbers given,

there is potentially some underreporting in the last school year, or it may be that they are being reported now.

It is important to say in answer to the Deputy's question that we have a small team of three educational welfare officers who follow up on every notification we receive. All 1,275 parents or caregivers will have received a phone call from one of my EWOs to check if they have given consent, whether they are happy with the reduced school day and whether there is a plan to return the child to a full timetable within six weeks. If they are not returned to the full timetable within six weeks, they have to be renotified to us and their understanding of the purpose of the use of a reduced school day must be checked along with the questions and queries they might have with regard to the return to a full timetable. The same educational welfare officer will then phone the school and engage with school leadership and whoever it is important engage with in the school to set out the parameters of what is allowable. They will discuss with them the plans to return that child to a full school day, working with the parents.

We have been collecting this data since January 2022. We are starting to get a picture of what is going on but where we hear numbers that do not fit with published reports, its important to remind everyone that there is a requirement to notify us and that there is a follow-up, with both school and family. All children should be in school for the full school day. The rationale for my service is to support a child to be in their classroom and learning for a full day.

Deputy John Connolly: Is it the same data on those who choose to seek to educate their children at home?

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: No, that is separate. In that instance, they register under section 14 with our colleagues in Tusla who sit in a different directorate from TESS. That is captured through the section 14 register for home schooling.

Deputy John Connolly: Is there data on the members of the Travelling community who might seek to home-school?

Ms Áine O'Keeffe: As is the case for our data sets across the board, that is coming. We do not have it at the moment.

An Cathaoirleach: That is everything. On behalf of the committee, I thank everyone for their attendance-----

Ms Kate Duggan: Apologies, Cathaoirleach. There were 2,439 children on the register for home education under section 14 as of May 2025 but we do not have the breakdown.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all the witnesses for their presence here today and for the very informative discussions along with their answering of the questions. I apologise for my absence at the start as I had some business on the floor of the Dáil. I thank them for coming along. We hope to interact with them again sometime in the future to build on the tremendous work they are doing.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.24 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 16 October 2025.