

Zappone says changes to foster care represent 'break from the past'

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Minister for Children Katherine Zappone has said improvements to the Child and Family Agency Tusla's foster care system will be rolled out later this year.

Ms Zappone said Ireland is no longer a place where children are placed in poor institutionalised care, with 92 per cent of children in care living in foster homes.

She told the Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs that following the Shannon Report on placement of children in care, Tusla's services, with a particular emphasis on out-of-hours services, were being strengthened.

The new measures include:

- * Extending the on-call social work service so that a social worker will attend in person, with gardaí, in all cases where Section 12 care order is invoked by a garda.
- * Providing out-of-hours telephone support to all foster carers.
- * Developing a single national service from three, out-of-hours services which include crisis intervention; emergency out-of-hours and the Cork service. This will be accessed by a single Tusla out-of-hours contact number
- * Additional staff will be allocated to underpin the improvements.

While the foster care system faced "serious challenges" and was "not perfect", she said she was convinced the current system "does a very good job".

The measures Ms Zappone proposes to introduce are designed to help address shortcomings identified by the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection Dr Geoffrey Shannon.

Dr Shannon's report considered 591 cases where the Garda exercised emergency powers under section 12 of the Child Care Act 1991, to remove a child to a place of safety.

Proper checks

The report documented failings in Ireland's child protection system, particularly a lack of adequate out-of-hours social work services.

Ms Zappone said as more children were being brought into family placements rather than institutional care "we expose weaknesses in the system".

She said the Health Information and Quality Agency was doing a very professional job as regulator but "we need more social workers to recruit and support foster carers.

"We need better ways to make sure all the proper checks are in place for safe and proper placements for children that need them," she said.

She said that in addition to follow up and monitoring services, inspections in 2017 had revealed ongoing issues of planning and service governance as needing improvement.

This includes having enough of the right type of placements, in the right locations, to meet the wide range of children's needs.

Out of hours care

It also includes making sure that foster carers receive the support and supervision needed, out of hours as well as during office hours, to assist them to continue to provide good quality care.

She said she understood from Tusla that an extended service put in place in late 2015, where gardaí have access to a national social work out of hour phone service had "led to improved communication" between themselves and the Garda.

Currently if gardaí they decide to invoke Section 12, in Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare and Cork, social workers meet directly with gardaí and bring the children to the appropriate placement. This service is available around the clock.

In other areas of the country gardaí are provided with information about suitable foster care or residential placement for the child.

In some situations following discussions between gardaí and social workers a child may go to a relative or neighbour, or back to their home if no longer under threat.

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