

15th June 2020

Ms. Aine McGuirk
Chairperson
IASW
114 -116 Pearse Street
Dublin 2

Dear Aine

Thank you for your letter of the 2nd June regarding family visits for children in care. I also acknowledge the concerns you raise on behalf of IASW members.

I'm heartened that you acknowledge the work done in Tusla regarding these issues in the face of COVID-19, and that many of your members have been to the forefront of actively delivering quality services to children in care at this very challenging time. Tusla has just launched a new risk assessment process for the matter of access in line with the phased lifting of restrictions in place for COVID 19. This assessment commenced on 19th May 2020 and will be carried out on every child in care, taking account of their individual needs and each family situation in light of the current health advice.

I acknowledge your concern that the current access arrangements in place in response to COVID-19 restrictions may be causing some distress for children in care. While this may be the case in certain instances, there is also some anecdotal reporting that for some children it has provided a welcome respite resulting in less unsettling behaviour. We expect to see a greater number of access visits and home visits taking place during the remaining phases set out in the Government's roadmap, the latest of which commenced on 8th June.

As with all aspects of society, COVID-19 has challenged the workforce in Tusla to be flexible and adapt quickly to the unprecedented challenge it presents. In the fullness of time when the virus has passed, research will doubtless provide evidence of the full extent and impact the restrictions have had on various facets of Irish life, including that of child protection and welfare social work.

I want to assure you that we are currently working assiduously to secure the best and most advantageous arrangements we can for all children in our care. This is complicated by the availability of the Microsoft Teams video platform which varies in different parts of the country. Where it is in effective use, it has enabled workers to supervise, facilitate and co-ordinate contact in a new environment and is reportedly enabling children to positively participate. Where contact is difficult or stressful, social workers and others have in many situations shown creativity in making alternative arrangements. The suite of options you mention are considered to be the basic tools in a social workers kit. They are currently in wide usage through the country and the exchange of photos, for example, whether on 'WhatsApp' or by traditional post, has greatly increased with social workers seeking to make the continued best use of this to support carers throughout the response to the pandemic and beyond. We continue to work closely with all our partners, including the Irish Foster Carers Association (IFCA), in putting the most appropriate arrangements in place for children in care.

Every crisis presents opportunities from which to take stock, learn from experience and build guidance and resilience into our work to respond to current and future challenges effectively. I agree with you that it also provides the opportunity to look at new and innovative ways of supporting children, parents, siblings, foster carers and social workers, and to guide access practice in the future. Many of the concerns you mention have been or are being raised daily in the context of the work being done by the our COVID-19 crisis management team, which has in its membership social work managers who communicate the views and concerns of those working on the frontline.

Finally, I take this opportunity to reaffirm Tulsa's commitment to developing the whole area of family contact using new media and to take every opportunity to build on these new means of communication in our everyday work. Central to this is the individual assessment of each child's needs and the skill of the individual practitioner in responding to them in the context of their carers, parents and guardians.

Yours sincerely,

Ger

Gerard Brophy

Chief Social Worker Tulsa
Brunel Building, Dublin 8
CORU No SW004689