



24 June 2014

Mr. Greg Heylin
Director
Cosc
Floor 2
Montague Court
Montague Street
Dublin 2

Dear Mr. Heylin

I refer to your letter of 28th February 2014 and enclosed questionnaire for completion by the Department in relation to the final review of the National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2010 – 2014 and proposals for a new Strategy.

As you know, the establishment of this Department dates from June 2011 and its policy responsibilities in the area arise under recent legislation (i.e. the Child and Family Agency Act, enacted in December 2013). Reflecting these developments, the Department's participation in the oversight and steering mechanisms linked to the strategy is a very recent development. In these circumstances the Department considers that the most appropriate response to your request relating to the questionnaire would be to set out in this letter the recent developments that have occurred and the future approach to be taken at a policy level in relation to this area.

Recent Developments

The Child and Family Agency Act 2013 specifies (under section 8) the functions of the Agency which was established with effect from 1st January 2014. Functions included, which are of particular note in this context, are as follows:

- the Agency shall support and encourage effective functioning of families;
- the Agency shall provide preventive family support services aimed at promoting the welfare of children;
- the Agency shall provide care and protection for victims of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, whether in the context of the family or otherwise;
- the Agency shall collaborate with any person that the Agency considers appropriate in relation to any matter connected to the agency's functions; and
- the Agency shall facilitate and promote enhanced inter-agency cooperation to ensure that services for children are co-ordinated and provide an integrated response to the needs of children and their families.

In April 2014 the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs published 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures' – The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People 2014 – 2020. The purpose of the Framework is to coordinate policy across Government with five specified national outcomes and to identify areas that, with focused attention, have the potential to improve outcomes for children and young people. It addresses the issue of domestic violence in the following respects:

- it includes (on page 27) recognition by the Government that neglect or abuse by a parent, or an inability to parent due to certain factors including domestic violence, are key factors leading to children being placed at risk and potentially entering the care system;
- it set out (on page 40) a commitment by the Government to adopt an effective inter-agency approach in relation to cases of child welfare and protection, establishing information and coordinating protocols (including Hidden Harm protocols) between agencies serving children and young people and adult-focused addiction, domestic violence and mental health services;
- it identifies (on page 76) among key facts that the National Audit of Neglect Cases found that parental alcohol misuse was a factor in 62% of neglect cases and that domestic violence featured in almost two-thirds of the sample cases;
- it further includes (on page 77) the importance attached by the Government to recognising the life consequences of trauma experienced by children who have certain negative life experiences including exposure to domestic violence; and
- it reiterates (on page 81) the Programme for Government commitment to introduce consolidated and reformed domestic violence legislation to address all aspects of domestic violence and intimidation in a manner that provides protection to victims.

'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures' can be accessed on this Department's website www.dcyia.ie.

Looking Ahead

Both the Department and the Agency are mindful of the fact that the relevant responsibilities under the Child and Family Agency Act necessitate the provision of care and protection for victims of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, whether in the context of the family or otherwise. In its responsibility to monitor and hold the Agency to account in the performance of its functions in this area, the Department's approach will comprehend the broad remit (i.e. extending beyond the involvement of children) given to the Agency in this regard.

The Child and Family Agency Act 2013 requires the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to develop a performance framework and annual performance statement to guide the work of the Agency, under sections 41 and 44 respectively.

The performance statement from the Minister provides the Agency with specific policy guidance, direction, prioritisation and resource parameters in relation to the preparation of its annual business plan. The performance statement for 2014 issued by the Minister included, inter alia, the following guidance and direction in respect of the alignment of services by the Agency:

“Focus should be given to the development and alignment of services relating to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and psychology within the wider child and family support delivery framework.”

The performance framework provides the context within which the Child and Family Agency must set out and implement its first three-year Corporate Plan, which will largely coincide with the first three-years of the new National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence. In that connection it is to be noted that the performance framework as recently issued by the Minister to the Agency includes the following guidance and direction (under service improvement objectives) as regards the provision of services in relation to this area:

“The Agency has been given an important resource in the assignment of key functions relating to psychology services and Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (DSGV) Services. These services are integrally connected with child and family welfare and well-being, though the remit extends to instances where there are adult victims also. The challenge is to ensure that these services operate in an integrated way to allow for holistic responses to the needs of children and their families.

- The Plan should outline activities on the part of the Child and Family Agency to develop and deliver the psychology service and the domestic, sexual and gender based violence service, in conjunction with the HSE, in a strategic manner. This should reflect the Agency’s commitments arising from related National Strategies including, inter alia, participation in the COSC led National Strategy on DSGV.
- The Plan should articulate what linkages will be established and how and to what degree these services will relate to the National Service Delivery Framework. This should reflect how consistency will be achieved in operational policy approaches underpinning access, referrals, notifications to these services and transfer of children and their families between providers.
- The Plan should identify requisite operational policy development to ensure clear pathways internally (to and from child protection services, education welfare, psychology and domestic violence services) as well as externally (to and from public health nursing, adult mental health, disability services, addiction and other relevant services). Operational policy development should also consider how to identify and respond to “hidden harm” associated with domestic violence which may be experienced by children within their families.
- Allied with the development of these services should be a range of implementation arrangements which reflect the important role of other agencies and sectors in providing requisite support. The developments identified in the Plan should demonstrate how the integration of planning and provision at local level with other agencies will be achieved to avoid duplication and maximise the impact of services provided.”

Other policy guidance and direction provided to the Agency under the performance framework includes the following:

Re. Service Improvement Objectives (other than that referred to directly above)

Supporting parents and families is the first step in ensuring children and young people achieve their potential. The clear intent of the Government's initiative to establish the Agency is to drive a shift to prevention and early intervention and to focus on parents and families as the primary agents in promoting the health and welfare of their children.

- In that context, the Corporate Plan should identify the Agency's plans to organise and develop universal and targeted family support services which are evidence-informed, preventive in nature and should reflect recent research evidence in the Irish context.
- The Plan should indicate how existing family support services (including the Family Resource Centre network) will be integrated and developed to take account of emerging evidence to support parents and families.
- The Plan should outline how family support is to be a fully integrated element within the National Service Delivery Framework. This should reflect the known requirements for strong and consistent policy approach underpinning referrals, notifications and transfer of children and their families between providers. Such operational policy relating to family support should provide a clear understanding of how pathways internally (to and from child protection services, education welfare, psychology and domestic violence services) as well as externally (to and from public health nursing, adult mental health, disability services, addiction and other relevant services) will operate. Operational policy development should also consider how to identify and respond to "hidden harm" associated with mental health (including addiction issues), disability, marital breakdown and domestic violence which may be experienced by children within their families.
- Allied with the development of family support, it is anticipated that there will be a range of implementation arrangements which reflect the important role of other agencies and sectors in providing family support. The Agency should outline planned developments to ensure the integration of planning and provision at local level with other agencies to avoid duplication and maximise the impact of services provided. It is anticipated that the Children's Services Committee structures at local level should be key to this work and the Plan should provide for a strong leadership role and participation by the Agency via these Committees. A particular focus will likely be required in respect of the role of public health nursing services as they relate to pre and ante-natal support and other services to children and their families in the primary care setting. The Plan should outline an approach to collaboration between the Agency and such services.

Re: Corporate Development Objectives

- The Agency, in its evolution from a start-up organisation must map the shift to a position of consistent quality driven services, having regard to available resources. Ensuring quality services is a transformational goal of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and needs to be fully reflected in the organisations culture and systems. Understanding system performance is critical to assessing quality and consistency within the system. The development of integrated data and information systems is a clear need for the new Agency. The Plan should identify clear, realisable goals for the roll-out of the NCCIS as a key priority.
- The Plan should also indicate, over the period, how this initiative will be extended to a fuller strategic review of data information and programme monitoring systems for both internal and external audiences. This might include appropriate research, data collection or like initiatives to support operational policy development; the identification of service needs / gaps; or national policy or legislative change.
- The Agency should continue to develop strong and positive working relationships with both statutory and non-statutory service providers so as to ensure seamless access to the required services for children and families, regardless of required service delivery and response ownership. Cross-Government and Interagency collaboration and co-ordination is a transformational goal of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and needs to be fully reflected in the organisation's culture and systems.
- The Plan should reflect how the Agency will develop a strategic approach to building interagency working with key service delivery partners as part of achieving better outcomes for children and their families. This will include statutory and non-statutory partners within the wider health and social care family, the school sector, youth justice and youth work in particular.
- Such strategic consideration should have regard to the Agency's role in promoting and nurturing interagency cooperation through the Children's Services Committees.

The Minister currently awaits receipt of the Agency's first Corporate Plan in accordance with the provisions of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013.

I trust that the information provided above will assist the work of Cosc in relation to the review of the existing National Strategy and the preparation of proposals for a new National Strategy.

Yours sincerely



PP
Colm Keenan
Principal