

2020.09.08

15 Deputy M.R. Higgins of the Minister for Children and Housing regarding the assessment of Children's Service: (OQ.228/2020)

Will the Minister provide his summary assessment of the Children's Service, stating in particular where it has improved since he took office and where it still needs to improve; and, in the latter case, will he state what steps he proposes to take to ensure such improvement?

Senator S.Y. Mézec (The Minister for Children and Housing):

My summary assessment of the Children's Service is that it is in a much better place than it was 3 years ago but there is still a long way to go before we can be truly satisfied with where we are. More important than my personal assessment of what is going well and what is not are, I think, the independent assessments. The Deputy will know when I took office as Minister for Children and Housing, Ofsted performed an inspection straightaway and then they performed a second inspection last year to follow up and note where there may or may not have been progress. They noted improvements specifically in the fostering and adoption service, strengthening of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub and better response for children at risk of exploitation. But they also highlighted areas where improvements were still needed, and these included the recruitment and stability of the workforce, extra support for young people leaving care and improving the early help offer. Since their inspection report came out, I think we have made some good progress specifically in those areas. There is now a permanent leadership team and we are relying less on agency staff, which is good, particularly for the young people that have relationships with their social workers. The care leavers' offer is now in place and early help has improved. Members will be aware of course that we founded the Children and Families Hub to support that, earlier this year. The COVID crisis has made progressing some of those further difficult and in continuing to try and improve on those areas that we know we have got to improve on I meet regularly with my officers and with stakeholders, including often with young people that have been through the service themselves, to work out what more we can do to improve the service.

4.15.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Minister has come up with a list but he is aware, and I know he is aware, that many of the users of this service do not trust it and are in fear of losing their children because of the action of some of the social workers and have resorted to taping all conversations with any social worker. Does he think that is a satisfactory thing where people have to tape conversations? Furthermore, is it satisfactory that people who do that are threatened that they may be breaking the Data Protection Law, which they are not?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

The ideal situation is that we get to a position where Children's Service is not seen by the mass of the population as being overly intrusive or acting in an improper way. It is going to take a long time to get to that position. It certainly is the case that there are parents out there who will be very worried when there is an intervention into their family life by the Government service. That does not mean that we should hold back when we think there are risks to children's well-being and sometimes we will have to make interventions that will always be unwelcome. Frankly, there is nothing we can ever do about that and we should not be scared of intervening to protect children where we think that is necessary. But, yes, it is the case that work has to be done to improve the relationships between service users and the service, where they may have a reasonably frequent relationship. The way that we will do that is by focusing on early help and intervention, which by its

nature will be more positive because it will be about help, rather than seen about punishment or that sort of thing. I accept fully that there is a long way to go and I have met with some people who I know have had difficulties with this. We take into account what feedback we get and it is a difficult journey to get to a position where trust will be rebuilt after years of things not being very good but we have to keep trying.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Is trust brought by threatening people who record conversations?

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Deputy, that was the answer to the final question.