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THE MORNING LEAD

Teens in private residential care dropped off at Tusla HQ over safety concerns

Private operators of residential care homes for migrant teens had fears over grooming and drug use.

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A NUMBER OF teenagers, displaced by war in Ukraine and living in privately operated residential care homes in Ireland, have been dropped to Tusla head offices by company staff who wanted to discharge them from the care of the homes over safeguarding concerns, *The Journal* understands.

These incidents occurred as staff in residential homes believed that they were not equipped to deal with risks to the children, including sexual exploitation in one case and substance use in another.

In multiple cases, private company staff have made requests to Tusla for the separated migrant children – who are in the country without a parent or guardian – to be moved into mainstream care over concerns that they were being targeted by groomers, and exploited.

The Journal understands that in one case in 2023, several requests were made by one private provider for a teenager to be moved into a mainstream care facility,

as evidence had been found which suggested that they were being groomed and were at risk of sexual exploitation from an outsider.

This request was not facilitated, and the situation escalated to the point where staff believed that a risk was being posed to other children in the home. The company running the facility opted to move the child into 'safehouse' accommodation in a different location, in the hope that Tusla would then move them into a mainstream residential care facility.

After Tusla did not move the child into a mainstream facility, staff made the decision to take the child to Tusla's Dublin offices to discharge them from their care, in light of the ongoing risks posed.

Responding to a number of questions about the case, a spokesperson for Tusla told *The Journal* that it cannot comment on instances related to individual children in its care. They added that all referrals regarding sexual exploitation concerns are screened and assessed by Tusla in line with its policies.

"Where there is an immediate risk to a child or young person, there is an immediate protective response," the spokesperson added.

Social worker shortage

Though private companies are hired to provide residential care to unaccompanied children, Tusla is responsible for the children, and for regulating the facilities they are placed in.

The Journal understands that staff working with some of the unaccompanied minors have expressed that language barriers, and the use of social media apps popular in Eastern Europe, have made it more difficult to identify the 'red flag' signs that typically alert staff to potential child grooming and exploitation cases.

These companies are monitoring migrant children with fewer qualified staff members than would be found in mainstream homes for Irish citizens. Though Tusla says "many" of the separated children in its care have an allocated Tusla worker (a qualified social worker in some cases, but not in others), *The Journal* understands that some children do not have one-to-one support from an agency worker.

A Tusla spokesperson said that each centre for unaccompanied children has a Tusla link worker. It's understood, however, that the link workers are not always qualified social workers.

They said that Tusla is aware of the increased risk of sexual exploitation of vulnerable young people, particularly in the context of the "increased global movement of people", and that it works with Gardaí on a national level on the matter.

"Where indicators of exploitation are identified in relation to a child, the matter is referred on to Gardaí," they added.

New protocol since Ukraine invasion

In the protocol that outlines the requirements for private care facilities housing Ukrainian teenagers, Tusla acknowledged that there is a "substantial" risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation to children seeking international protection.

The risk of sexual exploitation to children in care was also documented in the 2023 **'Protecting against Predators' report from SERP**, Ireland's leading sexual exploitation research programme. It found that children in residential care and emergency unregulated placements were being targeted by groomers.

One of its authors, UCD's Dr Mary Canning said that as her study uncovered how children in mainstream residential care homes were being targeted for sexual exploitation just last year, she is "highly concerned" for the safety of unaccompanied children from other countries who are living in similar homes but with even fewer qualified staff members.

Canning also said that although Tusla has developed a child exploitation procedure alongside Gardaí, the findings of her study – and of HIQA's recent inspection report on the agency's team for separated children – "leads one to question again how well this procedure is bedded down within these organisations and care facilities, and to question what more needs to be done to protect all children and young people from sexual exploitation".

Currently, private centres housing migrant teens are operating under a temporary protection directive which allows them to have only 50% qualified social care worker staff, fewer workers on shift caring for more children, and for children to share bedrooms.

This emergency directive was brought in as a response to the Ukraine displacement crisis and is still in place.

There has been a "significant" increase in the number of children seeking international protection since the invasion of Ukraine, "many of whom arrive unaccompanied in Ireland", a spokesperson for Tusla told *The Journal*.

These children are referred to Tusla by the Department of Justice. Some of them are placed with foster families, but in other instances Tusla places them with private providers.

There are currently 83 Ukrainian unaccompanied minors and nine children from other countries living in 10 privately run centres, which are operated by two companies.

Huge caseload

Separated children are supposed to have the same standard of care provision as any other child in state care in Ireland. However, the protocol put in place following the invasion of Ukraine says that the "current demand" for service capacity "does not permit" all of these principles to be implemented.

The protocol says private providers must consider how they will combat risks to children in their care, especially where there are less "qualified and experienced staff available".

These requirements were outlined in January 2023, and have not been updated since. The document which sets out the mandatory requirements for these centres acknowledges that the practice of room sharing for children in care has become "practically non-existent", due to updated national standards requiring each child to have their own room.

A person with familiarity of the care homes who spoke to *The Journal* said that they have seen up to five children, all of the same gender, sharing the same bedroom – which does not generally happen in mainstream facilities (there are exceptions, for example when siblings prefer to share a room together).

This sleeping arrangement has led to difficulties in monitoring and flagging incidents, including assaults by one child on another.

“Each of these children are meant to have an allocated social worker, but many have never been visited by a social worker bar their initial assessment. Maybe some of them who have been here for a year will have been visited once or twice, but the general impression we get is that the social workers would not be able to match names to faces,” the source said.

Tusla said that room sharing is permissible in centres that are registered under the Temporary Protection Directive that was enacted following the invasion of Ukraine, which allowed these private centres to operate under lesser requirements, and without planning permission.

Though this directive was enacted on an emergency basis, it has now been extended until March 2025, Tusla said. It added that staffing levels in these centres are “appropriate”, but may be increased if it is deemed necessary following inspections.

“We are seeing a significant level of incidents between children after bedtime in these shared rooms, in excess of 10 in a year in a house of less than 20 children in one case,” a source with knowledge of the situation said. “When an allegation of assault or a physical altercation happens, a significant event notification is made to Tusla. Staff and the provider, we are all trying our best to safeguard the children in these circumstances.”

The protocol that sets out the guidelines for these centres acknowledges that the risk of child trafficking and sexual exploitation has historically proven to be substantial for children seeking international protection, and that it is “not uncommon” for young people “who become involved” to be manipulated to “engage” or recruit other children.

It says that this should be considered as part of a “competent risk assessment”.

In 2022, 597 lone migrant children were referred to Tusla services, and 261 of those were lone Ukrainian children.

Last year, 177 lone children came to Ireland from Ukraine.

While children under the age of 15, and some children aged 15, have been accommodated within mainstream Tusla services, a number of private companies have been contracted to provide residential care for Ukrainian and other migrant children aged 15 and above.

Watchdog report

A year ago, HIQA carried out **an announced inspection** of Tusla’s Child Protection and Welfare Service for separated children seeking international protection. Tusla established a dedicated team for the care of these children seeking international protection in 2022 and this team was the focus of HIQA’s inspection.

Inspectors found that the Tusla team which is responsible for the care of lone migrant children did not appear to have carried out in-depth assessments in relation to trafficking and exploitation, and therefore did not have necessary plans, training and interventions in place.

The watchdog's inspectors flagged a number of concerns, saying the team was over stretched as a result of under resourcing. They found that the team was operating outside of Tusla's standard business processes for the management of child protection and welfare services, and that there was a lack of "policies, procedures and processes in place to guide staff".

HIQA further found that the Tusla team were under-resourced to undertake visits to see unaccompanied children in placements in different counties.

In one case, where a child was missing from care and flagged as 'at risk of exploitation', Tusla staff appeared to have not had a follow-up discussion with An Garda Síochána around the stated risk to the child.

In another case, there was a delay of one month for a strategy meeting to take place with gardaí for a child presenting "with trafficking risks and who was unallocated to a social worker".

Tusla brought in a new national procedure – the Child Abuse Substantiation Procedure (CASP) in 2022, which contained new guidance on how abuse allegations should be handled.

HIQA inspectors found that the Tusla team dealing with unaccompanied migrant children had a "lack of awareness" about the procedure, which resulted in gaps in practice.

Overall, HIQA advised that the Tusla team needed to review its consistency of indicators of child trafficking and/or sexual exploitation.

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