TUSLA and the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme Publish Report on the Sexual Health and Sexuality Education Needs of Young People in Care (SENYPIC)

10th March 2016 – TULSA and the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme published new research today documenting the sexual health and sexuality education needs of young people in care.

International evidence indicates that young people in State care are at higher risk of early sexual initiation, risky sexual behaviours and early pregnancy. The study describes the sexual education and sexual health needs of young people in care in Ireland, the approaches used by professionals engaged in providing such sexuality education and sexual healthcare and the challenges they experience in undertaking this work.

The research project includes an e-survey of 182 respondents and in-depth interviews with 22 service providers, 19 foster carers, 5 birth parents and 19 young people who had left State-care. The study was led by Professor Abbey Hyde, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems UCD.

Overall, the authors found that those with the most continuous and consistent contact with a young person were best placed to provide him/her with relationships and sexuality education (RSE). For young people in foster care, foster carers were the most important source and for those in residential care, the most important source was deemed to be the social care worker. There was a very strong shared sense that for young people in care, RSE needs to be underpinned with emotional security and stability in their everyday life and additional attention should be given to allowing the young person to develop self-esteem and the social and personal skills required to safely negotiate relationships and sexual encounters.

There were several references to very positive relationships with individual professionals in the interviews with care leavers. Care leavers also acknowledged the importance of consistent adults in their lives in terms of building meaningful relationships, as staffing changes can often interrupt the development of such relationships. Care leavers also highlighted the need for consideration to be given to how their personal information is shared, particularly in relation to intimate sensitive information.

The major challenge identified by service providers was the uncertainty arising from a perceived lack of clear guidelines nationally and locally about how they should approach sexuality education and the provision of condoms and contraception to young people who they know to be sexually active under age 17, the legal age of consent for sex. Almost all young care-leavers interviewed in this study (19), reported that they had first sex before the age of 17 years and the majority reported that they did not use contraception consistently.

Commenting on the findings, Cormac Quinlan, TUSLA Director of Policy and Strategy, said: “As the corporate parent, Tusla must ensure that all of the developmental needs of each young person in its care are met. This research provides a strong evidence base to support practice in relation to meeting the sexual health and sexuality education needs of young people in care.

“A robust action plan has been developed to respond to individual actions within the report. Along with our partners in the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme, Tusla is committed to its implementation. The report findings will also be incorporated into Tusla’s revised Alternative Care Strategy.”

Commenting on the findings, Helen Deely, Head of the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme said: “This is an important piece of research, as it clearly sets out that while there is some very good work happening with RSE and sexual healthcare for young people in care, there is a greater need to respond in a more coordinated way to the contraceptive, sexual healthcare needs of sexually active young people in a supportive way. We have committed to working with TUSLA and service providers on implementing the ten actions outlined in this report.”

Notes for Editors

- There are 6 reports in the series; report 1 contains findings from a survey of service-provider perspectives, report 2 is a descriptive mapping of Service Promoting Sexual
Health among Young People in Care, report 3 is a qualitative report on the perspectives of Key Service providers, report 4 is a qualitative report on the perspectives of foster carers and birth parents and report 5 is a qualitative report on the perspectives of care leavers. Report 6 is a composite report of the findings, that integrates the shared perspectives of the participant groups on the sexual health and sexuality education needs of young people in care. The reports are available at http://www.crisispregnancy.ie/research-policy/research-reports/list-of-research-reports/

- The HSE Foundation Programme in Sexual Health Promotion is a ten-day Programme that offer professional development for a range of professional, including social workers and social care workers. For information on training courses visit http://www.crisispregnancy.ie/support-for-services/foundation-programme-in-sexual-health-promotion-2016