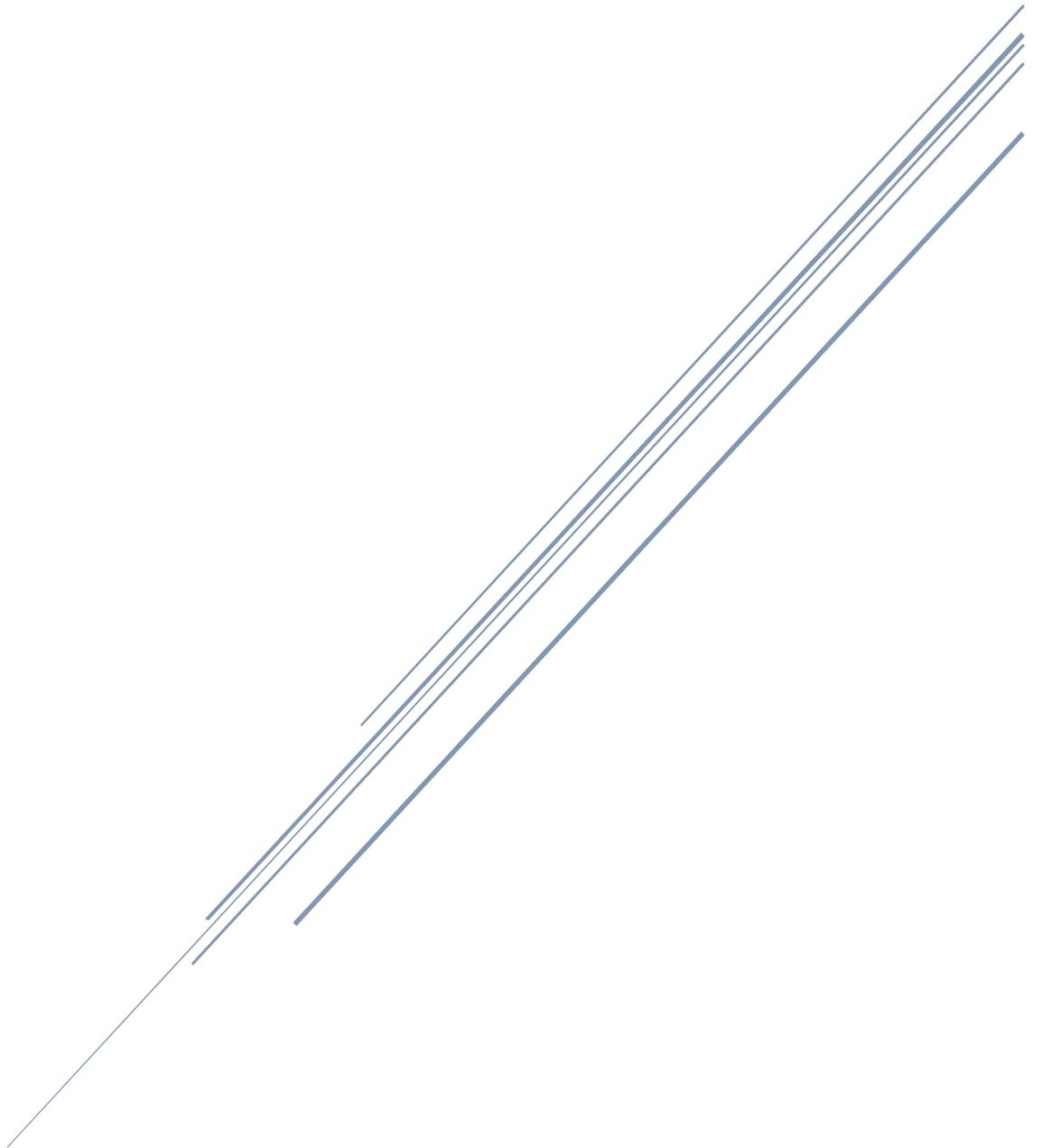


IFCA SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

May 31st 2017



IRISH FOSTER CARE ASSOCIATION

Chairperson, members, on behalf of the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA), I would like to thank you for the invitation to address the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs this morning.

I am accompanied by my colleague Breda O Donavan, Director of Finance, HR and Communication with IFCA.

The Irish Foster Care Association is the representative body for foster care in Ireland and promotes excellence in foster care. IFCA has 1,600 members – organised in branches around the country – comprised of foster families, social workers, social care workers, academics and those with an interest in foster care.

IFCA advocates for excellence in foster care and services to members include;

1. Advocacy
2. A National Support Helpline
3. Learning and Development
4. Support to members involved in local branches and regions.

The organisation has charitable status, is not-for-profit and is governed by a board of directors. It is registered with the Charities Regulatory Authority.

IFCA was established in 1981 and is funded primarily through three strands of income, Tusla, An Pobal and membership fees.

We have 14 staff of whom the majority are employed on part-time hours and two part-time TÚS staff.

I've included some more information about IFCA as an Appendix with this opening statement.

Importance of Foster Care

Foster Care is the backbone of care for children who are in the care of the State in Ireland. We need to celebrate the fact that the majority of these children are growing up as happy,

confident young people, who attend school every day and for some will be focussing on the upcoming state exams. Children in foster care are thriving and foster families are offering secure, happy, and fulfilling childhoods to children, supporting them to reach their full potential.

OVERVIEW OF FOSTER CARE IN IRELAND

You've asked us here this morning to talk about foster care in Ireland and it's important to start with its legal basis. The placement of children in care is legislated for in the Child Care Act 1991¹, The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995², and the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations 1995³, as amended, the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003⁴, all of which are underpinned by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Irish Government in 1991⁵.

Subsequent government policy, the *National Children's Strategy (2000)*⁶, *Brighter Outcomes Better Futures (2011)*⁷, the *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020)*⁸, the *National Consultation Policy (2015)*⁹, and the *National Youth Strategy (2015)*¹⁰, informs national objectives and outcomes for all children in Ireland.

The majority of children in the care of the state live with foster carers. At the end of February 2017, there were 6309 children in care, of which 5822 (92%) were placed in foster care; (27% in relative foster care).¹¹

At the end of 2016, there were 4,537 foster carers on Tusla foster care panels. ¹².

A child comes into the care of the State when it is assessed that they are at risk and require care and or protection. Children are received into care in either a voluntary or court

¹ The Child Care Act (1991) Department of Health

² The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995, Department of Health and Children.

³ The Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives Regulations 1995, Department of Health and Children.

⁴ The National Standards for Foster Care (2003), Department of Health and Children.

⁵ UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), UNCRC.

⁶ National Children's Strategy (2000) Department of Children and Youth Affairs, DCYA.

⁷ Brighter Outcomes Better Futures (2014) Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

⁸ The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014), Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

⁹ National Consultation Policy (2015) Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

¹⁰ National Youth Strategy (2015) (DCYA).

¹¹ Tusla Monthly Performance and Activity Data 2017. February

¹² Tusla Quarterly Performance and Activity Data; 2016, pp. 32-33:

ordered capacity. Foster care is the predominant type of care for children in the Irish State with approximately 92% of children placed in foster care. Foster families offer warm caring family life to children, tending to their physical, social, emotional and other needs which are underpinned by the stability of family life. Foster care can be offered to a child for either a short or long term basis. Short term foster care is for a period of less than six months' duration. Foster carers support children who may be dealing with issues of neglect, abuse, or abandonment and help them to feel supported, loved and accepted unconditionally.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Tusla, (Child and Family Agency) has the statutory responsibility to approve foster carers and place children with them. The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) makes provision for Tusla to contract other agencies to provide foster care on its behalf. There are six private foster care agencies in Ireland. The National Standards also requires Tusla to ensure that foster care placements are adequately supported and that children in foster care have an allocated social worker.

The process of becoming a foster carer is rigorous and is governed by the Procedures and Guidelines for Foster Care Committees (2017)¹³, which outlines the assessment process of prospective foster carers. Foster Care Committees are convened by Tusla and they approve foster care applicants. Reports on the review of foster carers, recommendations to remove a foster carer from the fostering panel, the outcomes of investigations of allegations made against foster carers, and placement breakdown are also adjudicated at the local foster care committee.

Foster carers do not have guardianship of the child, but can, following a period of five years, seek enhanced rights to sign certain documents on behalf of the child. A fostering allowance of €325 per child per week is made to foster carers for children under 12 years and €352 for children over 12 years. The allowance provides the foster carer to meet all of the needs of the child. When a young person reaches the age of 18 years they are formally not in care. However, where a young person remains living with their foster carer and continues to participate in full-time education, a reduced after care allowance of €300 is made.

¹³ Tusla Guidelines and Procedures for Foster Care Committees (2017).

CURRENT ISSUES

IFCA as the national representative organisation for foster care is in the unique position of hearing the views of foster carers as well as those of the other players in the system throughout Ireland. The National Support Helpline, which offers callers information and support is the “pulse” of issues which impact on foster carers as well as social workers and others involved in foster care. However, it is important to note that many callers to IFCA’s helpline are seeking support and information when they encounter a difficulty or problem in fostering.

I’ll now go on to reflect some of the issues confronting foster care in Ireland emerging through the Helpline and other sources.

SOCIAL WORK SUPPORT The National Standards for Foster Care sets out a range of standards to be attained for:

- The child
- The foster carer
- Tusla

Specifically, there is a requirement for the child to have a dedicated social worker and the foster carer to have a dedicated link social worker who provides support to the foster carer. A child and family social worker visits the child in the foster home and maintains a link with the child’s birth family. This role centres on a responsibility for the safety and welfare of a child.

In March 2017¹⁴, 6 % of children in general foster care and 8% of children in relative care did not have a dedicated social worker and at the end of 2016,¹⁵ 18% of general foster carers and 20% of relative foster carers did not have a link social worker.

It’s critical that this situation is addressed.

¹⁴ Tusla Monthly Performance and Activity Data 2017. February.

¹⁵ Tusla Quarterly Performance and Activity Data; 2016

COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES

Foster care is complex and involves many stakeholders. It is critical for proactive, respectful and trusting relationships to be fostered and maintained. IFCA's National Support Helpline statistics frequently cite poor communication as an underlying factor in the relationships involved.

Foster carers often express a lack of respect for the role which they offer. During 2015 both IFCA and Tusla commissioned research with both foster carers and social workers to identify areas of commonality and difference and which will inform the development of Tusla's Alternative Care Strategy. This report will be issued shortly.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

As described earlier, the majority of children in the care of the State reside with foster carers who offer stability and consistency to children, many whom have experienced traumatic early life events. It is critical to have a robust infrastructure which supports foster care. IFCA advocates for the development of policies and procedures which underpin the work of Tusla and to provide a consistent approach to all aspects across foster care.

IFCA is aware that Tusla have commenced the review and redevelopment of policies to inform practice in foster care and IFCA welcomes this. It is critical that when policies are developed that they are disseminated throughout Tusla fostering teams, that staff are trained in the understanding and implementation of the policy and that regular monitoring and reviews of implementation are conducted.

LEAVING AND AFTERCARE

IFCA welcomes the announcement by Minister Zappone of the introduction of the provision of after care plans for every child preparing for adulthood whilst in care. IFCA made a comprehensive submission to Tusla in the development of the after-care policy and welcomes its implementation.

Many children who grow up in foster care, continue to remain with the foster care family. Foster carers will require additional supports, for example, a Carers Allowance where the

young person remains living with them, and who may not attain complete independence in adult life as a result of complex emotional or social needs.

One solution to the prevention of homelessness of this group of vulnerable adults is the offering of a financial incentive to foster carers to modify or build living accommodation, where this is possible, where a young adult can live independently, but with the safety net of the wider foster family surrounding them. A similar incentive was offered to Childminders during the 2000s to increase childcare places. This is a proposal which IFCA would like to pursue with the DCYA and the Department of the Environment.

HANDLING OF ALLEGATIONS

During 2016, a predominant theme coming through our National Helpline was the handling of allegations of abuse made against foster carers by Tusla. Research indicates that allegations can happen to any carer.¹⁶ This is a distressing event for everyone involved, the child, the foster carer, the foster carer's own children and the birth family. It is therefore essential that the process is open and fair and underpinned by the rules of natural justice.

IFCA has advocated for one National Policy in responding to allegations made against foster carers for many years and welcomes the publication of the policy in May 2017.

IMPORTANCE OF TIMELY SUPPORT

It must be recognised that whilst the professionals interface with foster care, the foster carer offers 24/7 care all year around to the children. It is therefore imperative that foster cares receive timely support when requested.

Research indicates that prior to the making of an allegation of abuse against a foster carer by a child, the foster carer noted increased behavioural problems, and many requested respite support prior to the allegation being made.¹⁷ Similar circumstances occur prior to a placement breakdown.

¹⁶ The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers. REES Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, (2016).

¹⁷ The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers. REES Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, (2016).

It is critical that foster carers receive timely supports by social workers and other professionals when they seek support. They know the child, they are aware when behaviours change and when a timely intervention, such as a time away during the day, or a short respite will alleviate the tension in the placement. Foster carers must have access to on-going support, information and training and IFCA plays a central role in this, within the confines of its budget.

ACCESS

Recent developments of placing children with foster carers outside of their natural community and long distances from their place of birth has introduced a new paradigm into foster care. Foster carers express commitment to ensuring that children continue to have access to their family of origin and siblings as outlined in the child's Care Plan.

The placement of children great distances from their home of origin, requires foster carers to travel long distances to support access arrangements, in some instances to the detriment of their own children. The shortage of social workers has also resulted in foster carers being requested to supervise access arrangements, which is not within a foster carer's role. IFCA has highlighted the inappropriateness of this request with Tusla.

CONCLUSION

IFCA welcomes this opportunity to share its knowledge and experience of foster care in Ireland with the Committee. We will continue to advocate for excellence in foster care in Ireland with our members.

Foster care is the backbone of the care of children in the State and requires a robust infrastructure to support it. This includes the range of policies and procedures to underpin all aspects of foster care, which are developed, fully implemented and monitored.

Foster carers must receive the supports required to enable them to care of children with very complex problems on behalf of the state. Supports must be timely, and available and foster carers should not have to lobby for services which are a right for children.

The National Standards for Foster Care requires that both children in care and foster carers have dedicated social workers. IFCA acknowledges that Tusla has made improvements in the allocation of social workers, however, IFCA calls for the allocation of dedicated social workers for all foster carers and children in care.

IFCA offers support, information and learning for its members. IFCA's National Support Service offers information and support to callers. Over recent times, cases being managed by the support service are of significant complexities and require a higher level of support and guidance. IFCA would like to see its National Support Service enhanced to offer longer opening hours and offer a wider range of supports to foster carers who are in need of such supports and this will require additional funding.

THANK YOU CHAIRPERSON AND MEMBERS

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APPENDIX 1 – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT IFCA

Advocacy

IFCA advocates on behalf of all of its members for excellence in foster care. We raise issues of concern which are impacting in foster care with relevant statutory and non-statutory agencies. We make submissions to Tusla for the development of Policy relevant to foster care, and representations to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

National Support Helpline

The National Support Helpline, is available to members and non-members Monday to Friday from 11.00am to 3.00pm. It is supported by volunteers who are trained and who are offered regular support and supervision. The service also has a number of trained support volunteers who offer direct support to foster carers in complex situations. At times, support volunteers accompany foster carers to meetings, primarily with Tusla. During 2016 the National Support Helpline received 932 calls.

All support volunteers undertake a certificate course in counselling and psychotherapeutic skills; this is the minimum qualification support volunteers hold.

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

IFCA's Learning and Development service offers learning opportunities to members throughout the year. During 2016 learning events were offered nationally and included for example;

1. Exploring the dynamics of Attachment in Adult Life
2. An introduction to Child- Parent Attachment
3. 250 foster carers and social workers attended information talks on IFCA's publication of Dealing with Allegations of Abuse.

IFCA hosts a national conference each year and which is offered to members and non-members. 2016'S conference was officially opened by Minister Zappone, and entitled, "Strengthening Relationships Strengthening Care". Minister Zappone thanked foster carers for the role that they play on behalf of the State.

This event is significant in the lives of those involved in foster care, as it offers the fostering community opportunities to hear of new developments in foster care, research and sharing of information and experiences. Unique to the national conference is the children's programme which is a distinct programme of events for children in foster care and birth children over the course of the conference weekend. 240 adults and 100 children attended the national conference in 2016.

IFCA BRANCHES

IFCA has a number of branches nationally, and which are supported by volunteers and staff. Branches are an opportunity for foster carers to come together locally to share experiences, offer peer support and attend learning events. Branches also organise activities and outing for foster carers and children.

IFCA hosts National Fostering Awareness Week each year which is a celebration of foster care in Ireland. A number of events were held nationally and locally this year.