



Irish Foster Care Association

National Helpline Support Service

ANNUAL REPORT

2017

Introduction

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 stakeholders 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. Many callers to IFCA's helpline are seeking support and information when they encounter a difficulty or problem in fostering.

IFCA'S 2017 Support Service report documents the work of the National Support Helpline and issues arising for foster carers and others who are involved in foster care.

The aim of the report is to provide a thematic overview of the issues presented by users of the service and to also present an outline of the work of the service during 2017.

Considerations

IFCA'S National Support Helpline receives contact from callers involved in foster care, of whom the majority are foster carers. Issues raised in calls are relevant to the caller specifically and this report does not generalise issues to the general foster care population. Data trends elicited are reflective of the issues raised over a defined period, January to December 2017 in the case of this report. Cases created are not quantified as a percentage of the foster care population. Rather, figures relating to percentages are that of the overall volume of cases and calls handled by IFCA's support service. Secondary issues are elicited throughout the course of a call conversation and indicate additional and compounding factors relating to the primary issue. The overall caseload referred to in this report is not indicative of issues solely relating to IFCA members as 42 per cent of all cases in this period were for non-members.

Irish Foster Care Association

The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) is the representative body for foster care in Ireland. Child-centred and rights-based, IFCA promotes excellence in foster care for all those involved. Membership is broad-based and includes general and relative carers, social workers, social care workers, child care workers, academics and others with an interest in foster care. In 2017

IFCA had 18 active branches nationally which are run by committed volunteers who are IFCA members. IFCA has over 1,500 members and services include:

- Promotion of foster care to ensure society understands, values and recognises how foster carers transform children's lives
- Support for fostering families and the services that work with them to provide the best possible care for children and young people.
- Influencing policy and the legislative framework, so it supports and promotes excellence in foster care
- Developing training and resources that support all those connected with fostering in Ireland and offering them up-to-date information on changes taking place in this area

IFCA's National Support Helpline

IFCA's National support Helpline, established in 2013, provides an invaluable resource to all those involved in foster care in Ireland. It is available to callers Monday-Friday from 11am-3pm and is delivered by a team of staff and trained volunteers. The support helpline offers a range of supports to those who are in contact, offering information and guidance on how to become a foster carer, related financial issues, how to access appropriate supports, how to handle allegations and much more. There are several ways in which individuals may contact IFCA's Support Service, which includes a dedicated helpline on **+353 (1) 458 5123** and an email address at , support@ifca.ie. Most callers contact the helpline directly by phone.

Where IFCA members require more in-depth assistance over time, a National Support Volunteer may be assigned to assist the individual in question. This may involve frequent scheduled phone contact and, in appropriate circumstances, meeting in person with that individual. This additional support is only available to IFCA members. During 2017, data from the National Support Service identifies that the requirement for this additional support has increased by 59 per cent.

Support statistics are reviewed on a weekly and monthly basis by the Head of Support and data is routinely shared with Tusla nationally and locally and facilitates the collaboration in identifying solutions to issues which feature within the data trends. Specific trends in issues

are tracked, and where a particular area of foster care is consistently arising or increases in cases over a three-month period, IFCA makes contact with management in Tusla with a view to discussing the specific issues and the recent emerging trends. The purpose of this is to jointly identify solutions to mitigate the emergent trend. IFCA can provide a snapshot of the specific issues relevant to any one local Tusla area with a view to finding collaborative solutions, whilst maintaining confidentiality at all times.

During 2017:

- 906 cases were managed by the support team
- Preliminary research was undertaken into one year of support cases relating to private placement arrangements
- Data was used to inform submissions for policy development and government consultations.

How Data is Used

Data and trends from the National Support Service serve as 'live' and relevant data which enables IFCA to contribute to policy submissions and to advocate on issues relating to foster care. Data from 2017 supported the development of submissions to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Child Mental Well-being, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, on Foster Care, the Government's Rebuilding Ireland consultation and towards the development of Tusla's After Care Policy. (All submissions may be accessed on www.ifca.ie)

How Cases are Created

1. *A 'case' is created for every individual who contacts the helpline through phone, email or in person, several actions which are employed to respond to the query/issue are captured.*
2. *The 'case' is closed when it is deemed that no further follow up is required.*
3. *If individuals contact the service again, with a re-emergence of the original problem, a new case will then be created and managed.*

4. *If the same individual contacts the service about a different issue at a later stage, a new case is also created.*
5. *Each case therefore represents an individualised set of actions relating specifically to the person who has contacted the service at a point in time.*

IFCA'S Support Volunteers

IFCA's Support Volunteers are trained and supervised volunteers who support individual families through times of difficulty or distress. Although IFCA is a membership organisation, the helpline facilitates the provision of service to every individual who calls.

Activities during 2017

Support and Supervision Models Formalised

A review of the model of professional supervision and IFCA's structure and model of support for all helpline and national support volunteers was conducted during 2017 to document and articulate the approach.

External Relationships

Staff in the support service continued to build relationships with external agencies, attending ongoing meetings and communication with a number of organisations such as CORU, HIQA, Barnardos, the Office of the Ombudsman, and the Ombudsman for Children. This has been invaluable in determining areas of commonality and for sharing information.

'Moving Forward'

In response to a call for funding applications by POBAL on the topic of loss and change, IFCA submitted a proposal to Pobal which was approved for funding in late 2017. The project entitled 'Moving Forward' is scheduled to commence in 2018.

Association with Irish Attachment in Action

IFCA was a key partner in the foundation and development of an organisation called Irish Attachment in Action (www.iaia.ie) in 2016. IAIA hosted its inaugural conference in May 2017

where IFCA played a significant role in its development and planning. The conference was attended by many foster carers.

A number of speakers, including IFCA's Head of Support, offered thought-provoking presentations. The keynote speech was delivered by Helen Minnis, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Glasgow and the patron of Scottish Attachment in Action. Other presentations included 'Why Attachment Matters in Education', 'The Schools for Hope programme' and Christina Enright talked about the 'Five to Thrive' programme.

IFCO Conference, November 2017

IFCA was delighted to be represented at the IFCO conference in November in Malta where the Head of Support presented a 90-minute workshop, entitled 'Stories, Support, Statistics & Solutions'. This focused on relaying information on IFCA's model of support and on how we move from listening to individuals' stories, to providing support, to advocating for excellence in the Irish foster care system.

Information talks on Safe Care and Allegations

An emerging trend from the National Support Helpline during 2017, was that of allegations made against foster carers and how they are responded to by Tusla. In response to this identified need, IFCA developed an information booklet, entitled, " Guidance on dealing with Complaints or Allegations of Child Protection and Welfare Concerns", - with a series of corresponding information talks which were delivered to members in the locations outlined below;

- Carlow/Kilkenny
- Wexford
- Fresh Start
- IFCA Tallaght Office
- Dublin South East/Wicklow
- Care Visions Ennis
- Limerick
- Nenagh
- Cork

- Kerry
- Tuam
- Laois
- Sligo

Homemakers' Scheme

Liaison took place during 2017 between IFCA and the lead on the 'Homemaker's Scheme' of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, in order to compile information resources on the scheme which has particular relevance to thousands of carers, past and present, including foster carers. An information leaflet was developed and shared with all members through IFCA's communication e-zine. This information can also be accessed on IFCA's website.

Mental Health Reform Ireland

IFCA was accepted as an associate member with Mental Health Reform in 2017. This will give the organisation a platform to engage in meetings and forums on topics of mental health and to advocate for change and improvements from the perspective of foster care in Ireland.

Aftercare

Tusla developed a standardised After Care Policy during 2017 to which IFCA contributed. The introduction of the policy was widely welcomed. To ensure that both foster carers and social workers are aware of the provisions of the policy, IFCA developed a standardised document and approach to callers requesting information on aftercare. This includes details on resources, links to the relevant procedures and policies and also includes a list of all relevant regional aftercare managers.

Challenges to Provision of Support

Variation of approach to management

The National Support Helpline enables IFCA to offer a national view of issues and trends in respect of foster care in Ireland. Data elicited through the National Support Helpline enables IFCA to identify whether national policies for foster care are being implemented in a consistent manner across all Tusla areas or not. A positive example of a consistent application of a policy is Tusla's new After Care policy. Additionally, the introduction of a standardised Interim Policy, introduced in April 2017, for the response to allegations made against foster carers, has improved practice in this complex and distressing area of foster care.

However, other policy areas for foster care require a similar approach to development, dissemination and implementation by Tusla. During 2017, trends identified an inconsistent approach in the areas of:

- Placement Disruptions
- Foster Care Reviews
- Communication with foster carers

The absence of consistent implementation of some of Tusla's standardised policies and the widely varying practices locally make it difficult for IFCA and its volunteers to offer definitive advice on the relevant areas of foster care which impacts daily on foster carers in carrying out the very valuable role which they fulfil. It is critical that, as a national organisation for foster care, IFCA is in a position to offer information and guidance to callers to the helpline that represent a national and standardised approach to daily practice.

In advocating for excellence in foster care, IFCA will:

- Continue to liaise with Tusla's senior management with a view to highlighting the inconsistencies in the delivery of Tusla's policies and seek to be kept informed of plans to improve the standardisation of approach
- Continue to liaise with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs

- Continue to make available to Tusla any specifically tailored reports derived from the support service, on request, in order to support Tusla to identify trends in issues and practice in respect of the delivery of foster care
- Continue to work collaboratively with Tusla so that the benefit of joint consultations and the availability and cooperation of both organisations is seen to benefit all involved in foster care.

Communication difficulties with social workers:

Foster care is complex and can therefore be fraught when complex issues are required to be resolved. This requires a high level of communication which is respectful, timely and sensitive. Where those involved in foster care are experiencing difficulty, in particular where allegations are made against foster carers, or there are placement disruptions or issues in respect of access for the child, the importance of clear and respectful communication is critical.

This is an area which generates high volumes of calls by foster carers to the helpline. IFCA and Tusla will commence the development of a Memorandum of Understanding during 2018 to establish a defined protocol for communication at all levels which will contribute to improved communication.

IFCA will:

- Engage proactively in the development of the MOU for communication with Tusla
- Continue to be committed to the sharing of information and statistics on key issues with the relevant personnel in Tusla through the provision of more concise and tailored analysis of the issues, and develop reports for Tusla areas where requested
- Draw from, and implement, the solutions as identified in the joint IFCA/Tusla Joint Consultations Report to improve the area of communication between social workers and foster carers.

Resolution of Issues/Complaints

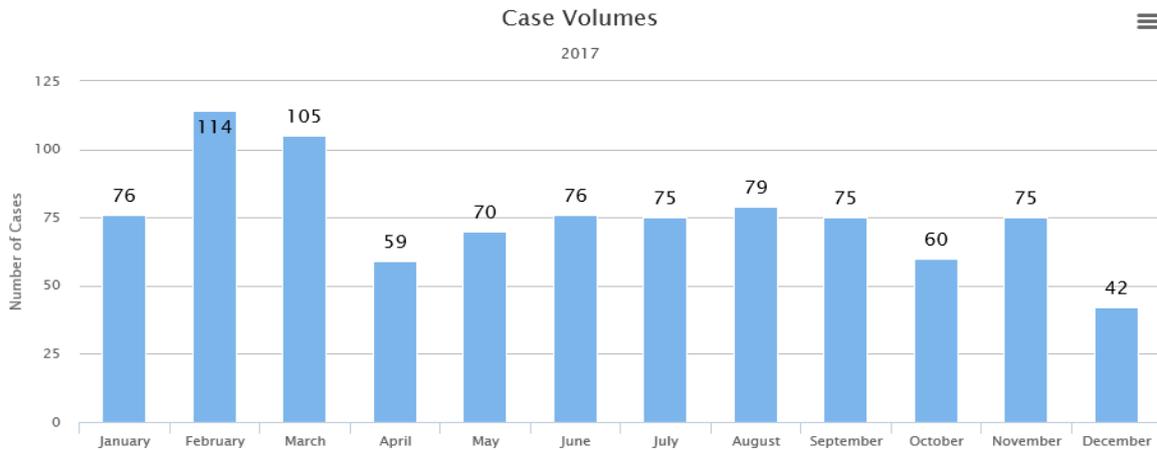
IFCA's support volunteers are trained to support and guide all users of the service, informing them of the options and steps available to take in resolving issues of difficulty in foster care. This involves attempts at resolution at a local level initially, and where no satisfactory outcome is achieved, foster carers are advised of the availability of Tusla's complaint and feedback service, as well as the existence and purpose of both the Office of the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children. The service continues to receive feedback from foster carers, who state that as a result of taking matters through such routes, they feel their situation has worsened or they have experienced significant delays in response. This is a significant issue of concern for foster care and IFCA.

It will be important for IFCA to continue to liaise with the Tusla Director of Quality and National Manager for Quality Assurance and to increase the frequency of meetings to focus on issues of quality of service experience for foster carers. IFCA produced an article on the resolution of issues for its 4th journal, 'Foster' to offer foster carers information on this topic. An information booklet on this topic is also scheduled for publication in 2018. This will support foster carers by offering knowledge of navigating systems to resolve issues. IFCA have also met with representatives of CORU to establish a more defined relationship between both organisations and to gain an overview of their role.

Case Volumes

In 2017 the service dealt with 906 cases. This is just slightly lower than in 2016 (932 = decrease of -2.79 per cent). However, the complexity of the cases was more pronounced resulting in the service handling 1,726 inbound contacts (phone/email/in person) last year compared to 1,445 in 2016 – an increase of 19.45 per cent.

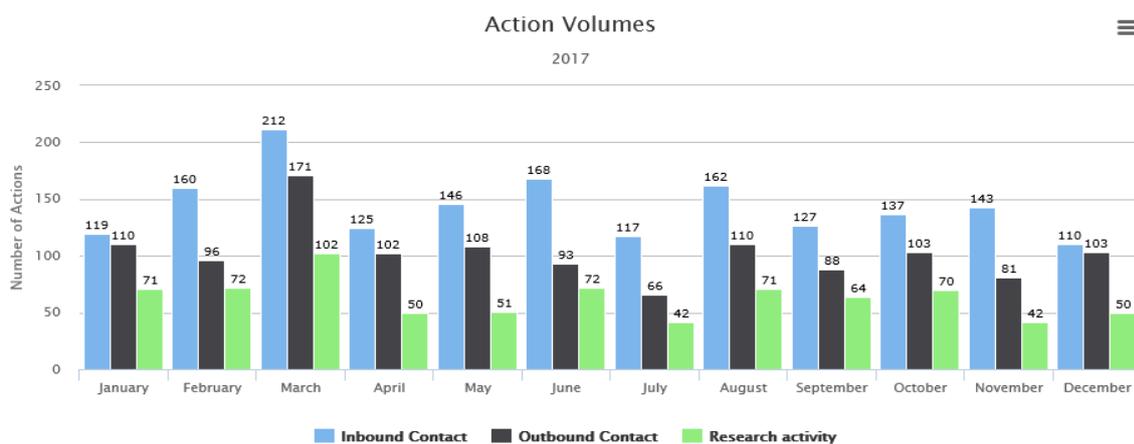
Fig. 1: Case Volumes (2017)



Action Volumes

Depending on the complexity of an individual’s query, the volume of work or duration of time spent assisting the query can vary. For ongoing complex cases, IFCA members may be referred to a specific National Support Volunteer. Some complex cases may remain under the responsibility of the telephone helpline staff team and can accrue significant amounts of work in order to bring a case to resolution. For example, (for any one case) more than one *inbound contact* (phone/email/in person) and numerous *outbound contacts* in return, or an in-depth piece of ‘*research activity*’. This can consist of (but not be limited to) checking appropriate legislature and guidelines, researching available resources, liaising with relevant statutory organisations (e.g. Social Welfare, Department of Justice, etc) or case discussion with supervisors. IFCA always record these actions separately in order to give a concise indication of the volume of work undertaken by the support service – which is not always solely represented by the number of ‘cases’.

Fig. 2: Action Volumes for Cases (2017)



Cases by County

When dealing with foster carers, the Tusla area relating to the foster carer’s social work team is always identified with the caller as opposed to their geographical location. In this way, we can ensure that a case, for example, of a carer living in Louth but working with the North Dublin Tusla team is attributed to North Dublin on IFCA’s data base. At times, cases from an unknown origin are recorded. These requests have generally come through emails whereby the location is not always specified. In addition, many cases are attributed to Dublin (non-specified). These tend to represent contacts from other organisations not specifically attributed to a Tusla area (eg Barnardos, Office of the Ombudsman, etc).

As in previous reports, cases originate from a wide and diverse range of locations. In 2017, the highest volumes of cases have come from the following areas:

- Galway/Roscommon: 10.8%
- Cork: 10.4%
- Midwest (North Tipp; Clare: Limerick): 10.3%
- Dublin North City: 5.2%

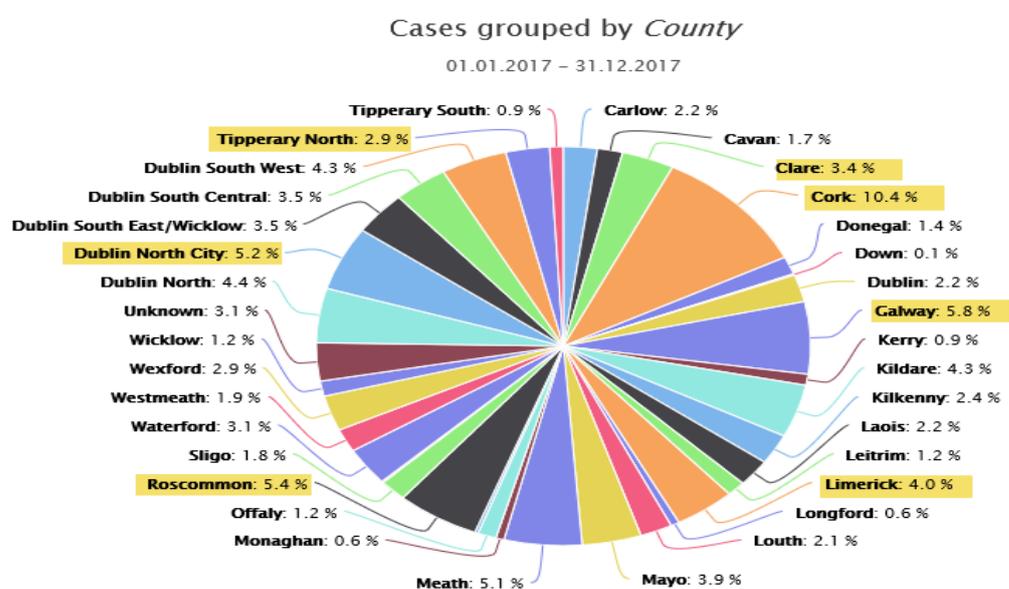
There is an increase in cases from Roscommon and Galway, (the same Tusla area), together accounting for 10.8% of all cases. These cases represent a broad range of issues and from a diverse cross section of those involved in foster care. In the event that social workers contact IFCA to seek to affirm policy or practice, this is seen as a very welcome development

The volume of cases from Cork continues to represent the highest relative percentage of cases with the helpline from foster carers. Cases from the Cork area have tended to focus on very similar issues, such as access, allegations and, in particular, communications difficulties with social workers. These issues have been brought to the attention of senior Tusla personnel in the area over a number of years. IFCA recognises that this area has a high volume of children in care (and, accordingly, foster carers in place) and is likely to represent higher volumes of cases. Whilst IFCA acknowledges this, it is the primary objective of the support service to bring the generality of issues and specific trends or increases in relative call volumes to the attention of area managers within Tusla. The actual number of cases may often be small in terms of a percentage of the total numbers of carers in an area, but the frequency with which certain issues present necessitates that IFCA represent this information to Tusla in order to work collaboratively to reach solutions.

In IFCA’s 2016 annual review, the Midwest (Limerick/Clare/Tipp. North) was identified as an area where a significant increase in cases was observed. The total of cases for this area continues to remain high and continues to increase. This area will be a priority for the support service in 2018 with IFCA seeking to discuss possible resolutions with regard to frequently occurring trends noted with Tusla management.

These trends should inform further learning and development for all involved in foster care.

Fig. 3: Cases by County (2017)



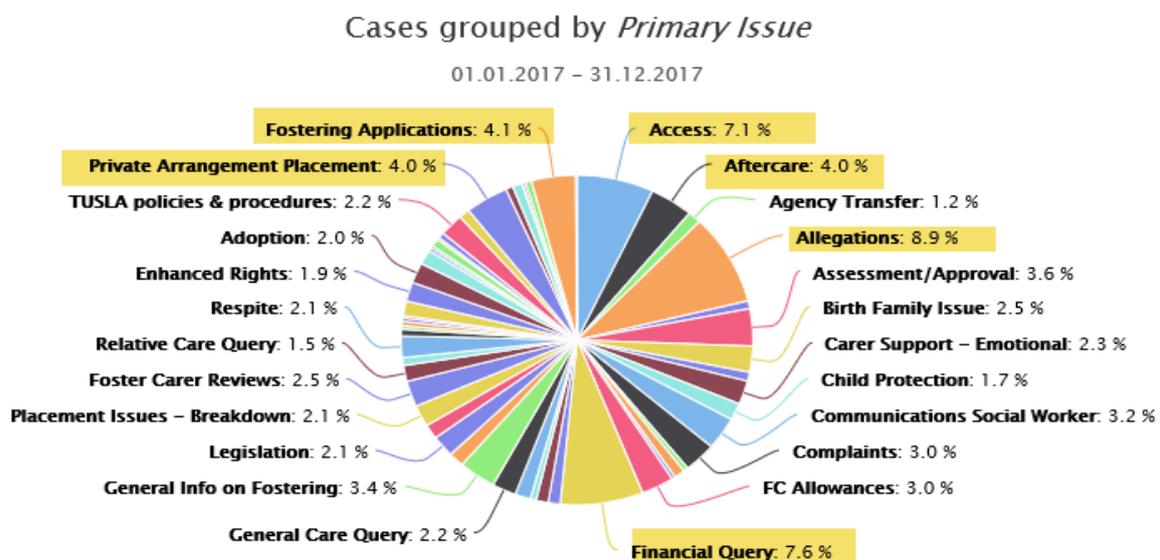
A positive trend is the reduction in overall case volumes from Waterford and Wexford throughout the year. There has been continued communication between senior management in Tusla and IFCA throughout 2017 in regard to the sharing of information on specific issues in the area which has resulted in positive and constructive outcomes. The service continues to offer prolonged support to a number of users of our service from cases which originated prior to 2017.

An increase in cases from Carlow/Kilkenny, many relating to similar issues, is noted in the 2017 statistics. This is despite previous reductions in case volumes (as cited in IFCA’s 2016 review). This is an area which requires an increased level of contact between IFCA and senior Tusla management to identify solutions to trends identified. IFCA has active branches in this area who continue to link in with the local fostering teams.

Primary Issues

In response to new and emerging trends in foster care, the service continues to add new fields of issues to our database when relevant. Therefore, there are new subject areas reported in the 2017 report with no comparative data from previous reports.

Fig. 4: Primary Issues (2017)



The most frequently cited issues for this period are:

- Allegations: 8.9%
- Financial Query: 7.6%
- Access: 7.1%
- Fostering Applications: 4.1%
- Private Arrangement Placement: 4%
- Aftercare: 4%

Overview of most frequent presenting issues

➤ ***Fostering Applications:***

In 2014, the highest percentage of cases was that of individuals seeking information about becoming foster carers. Prospective carers are routinely sent information packs and advised to make contact with their local Tusla fostering team and are also provided with the details of the private fostering agencies. Internet searches for general information on fostering yield results that point to IFCA and in many instances prospective callers indicate they have been given our number by the local Child and Family Agency with regard to obtaining details.

In 2014, such cases accounted for nearly 25 per cent of all calls and queries. This number reduced to 9.3 per cent in 2015, 6 per cent in 2016 and to 4.1 per cent of calls during 2017. The demand for more foster carers continues to grow, yet the numbers of callers seeking information on becoming a foster carer is decreasing as demonstrated in the reduction of calls from 25 per cent in 2014 to 4.1 per cent in 2017. Tusla's website offers direct information to potential foster carers and the explanation for the reduction in calls to IFCA for this type of information may be because of greater access to online information from Tusla.

Through IFCA's continued partnership and communication with Tusla, we are aware of the great need of, and the difficulties in recruiting, new foster carers. It is therefore imperative to continue to support existing foster carers in their role, in order to retain the existing cohort and to promote positive messages on the importance and value of foster care.

IFCA hosts “Fostering Fortnight” annually each year to promote and recognise the importance and value of Foster Care. It is through such campaigns, that the profile and importance of foster care for thousands of children can be achieved. IFCA liaises closely with Tusla in the promotion of “Fostering Fortnight”.

Access:

The volume of cases citing access as the primary issue has remained similar in 2017 compared to 2016. Access can be a source of difficulties for both children and foster carers in placements. Foster carers recognise the importance of access for children to their natural family whilst in foster care, and most access is facilitated by the foster carer – which means they are responsible for bringing the child to and from access. IFCA’s publication ‘A-Z guide to Fostering’ offers guidance on access, stating:

‘Foster carers are not required to pay the costs associated with access such as payments to birth parents or for venue. They are, however, expected to transport the child to and from access visits, where it is possible and appropriate to do so. Foster carers are encouraged to ensure, where appropriate, that their foster child has some small monies for their own use when attending access. At all times where supervision of access is required this is the responsibility of the child and family social worker, child care worker or access worker.’

A trend observed during 2017 was that some foster carers are being requested to attend access with children which is unsupervised by a social worker or access worker. IFCA believes that this is not appropriate as it may compromise the relationship between the foster carers, foster child and birth family.

Additional difficulties relating to access include the management of children’s behaviour prior to and following on from access visits; frequency of access visits conflicting with arrangements for other children in care or carers’ own children; cancellation of access visits and what is being viewed as ‘uncooperative rescheduling’, and lack of clarity regarding ‘court-imposed’ access.

Of concern is that foster carers calling the helpline report that when they highlight issues of concern for the child whilst on access or if they advocate on the child's behalf, that this is being viewed negatively in the foster care review process. Foster carers have also articulated a real fear of the child being removed from the placement where they raise issues for the child or themselves. Poor communication between carers and social workers as demonstrated in the figures relating to secondary issues can contribute to these issues.

IFCA considers that situations such as this are not conducive to positive placements and, as research indicates, where a foster carer feels supported through listening, hearing and responding to them, this promotes positive stable placements. IFCA continues to advocate the importance of appropriate support being offered to maintain a placement – except in the presence of significant risk.

The financial aspects of facilitating access is another area which callers to the helpline query. The placement of children long distances from their home of origin requires many foster carers to travel further distances than in the past. This incurs considerable cost and time, and, can impact on the foster carers' own children's activities. This is an area for further observation and review.

To ensure a consistency of approach in this area, IFCA has requested Tusla to review relevant guidance documents in respect of excess travel for access and financial reimbursement where appropriate. IFCA also raised the issue of foster carers being requested to supervise access with senior management in Tusla, who have addressed this with social work staff.

➤ ***Allegations:***

The issue of allegations and related child protection queries was one of the most pressing challenges in 2016. This also continued to be an area of great concern in 2017, with clusters observed within certain parts of the country. This was an unprecedented increase for any one issue reported to the support service, and it placed considerable demands on the service. The ongoing complexities of many of these cases have led directly to the necessity of additional training relating to allegations for the support team throughout the year.

In meetings with various Tusla managers, it became apparent that there are a wide range of differing policies being used in the management of allegations. Carers continue to report that they are not being provided with sufficient information or correspondence on the processes involved nor are they receiving what they consider to be adequate support when an allegation has been made against them. One of the key difficulties reported to IFCA in such situations continues to be the lack of information regarding the process or the corresponding timelines involved.

IFCA raised this issue during 2016 and 2017 with Tusla. We welcomed the introduction of an interim policy in April 2017, entitled *Interim Policy for managing concerns and allegations of abuse or neglect against foster carers and Section 36 (Relative Carers)*, for its teams. All investigations commencing on or after the date of issue of the protocol will be subject to the protocol. For investigations that commenced before its introduction, the policy utilised from the onset will still apply. It is welcomed that the Interim Policy is viewed as being widely implemented nationally. It will be important to move from an Interim Policy to a standardised National Policy in 2018.

In 2017, 37 per cent of cases were allocated to national support volunteers to assist with cases where an allegation has been made against a foster carer. The majority of all such cases have directly cited communication difficulties with a social worker as a secondary concern or difficulty in dealing with the allegation. IFCA continues to view this issue as one of our highest priorities for 2018.

➤ ***Private Placement Arrangements:***

The volume of calls relating to this issue rose from 2.8 per cent of all cases in 2016 to 4.1 per cent in 2017. In reviewing the secondary issues for these cases, the following are the most represented

1. Financial Query: 54%
2. Tusla Policies & Procedures: 13%
3. Foster Care Allowances: 6%

4. Psychological Support for Children: 4%

Private Placements

Callers to the helpline requesting information about 'private placements' express concerns over the financial strain of caring for a relative child. The helpline volunteers offer information in respect of the status of being a foster carer, i.e. one that has been assessed and approved as a foster carer and who has a contract with Tusla. Often, there is no necessity for the relative child to be in care, or there is reluctance on the part of the relative for this to occur. Nevertheless, the absence of financial assistance (often including child benefit) is often listed as a primary concern for those in this situation. Callers in this category often refer to the continued involvement of Tusla with the child's family and of the continued involvement by Tusla social work staff in such situations.

The number of calls to the helpline for such situations in 2017 was greater than that for Aftercare, Disabilities, Education, Psych support for Children, Placement Endings, Respite and a whole range of other issues.

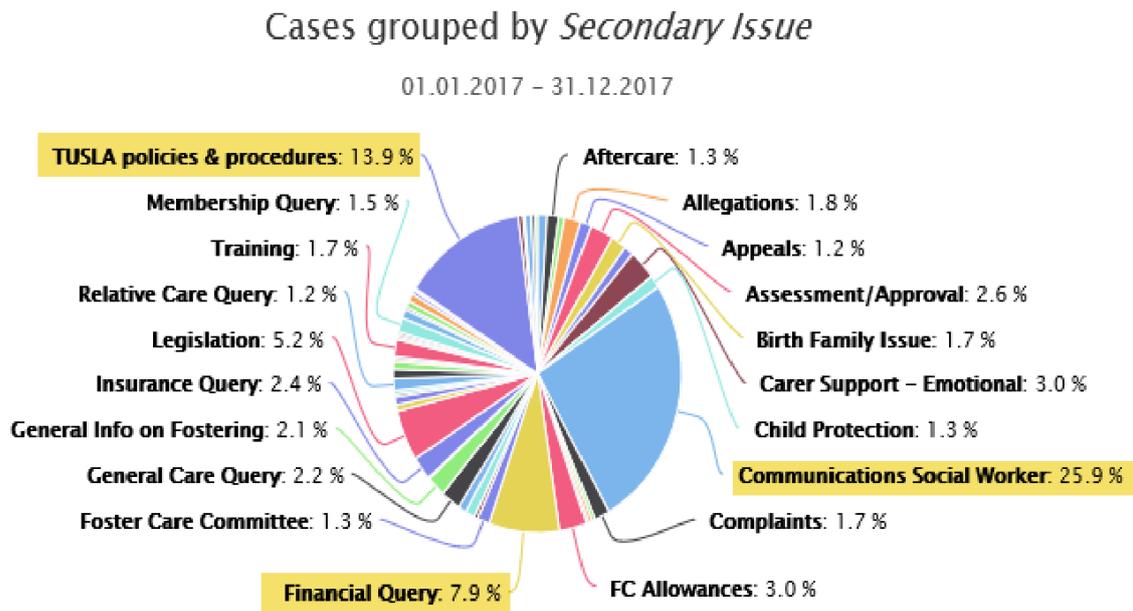
It is imperative that relatives or friends who care for children within the context of a private placement arrangement are clear from the onset of the arrangement into which they are entering.

IFCA has contacted the National Parents Network (NPN), whose members also experience such placements. Preliminary work was conducted by IFCA in this area during 2017 with a view to developing a position paper in 2018 in which collaboration will also continue with the NPN.

Secondary Issues

The inclusion of the secondary presenting issue gives a more comprehensive overview of the difficulties experienced by our contacts in dealing with their primary area of concern (Figure 5).

Fig. 5: Secondary Issues (2017)



As in all previous reports, the majority issue is communications difficulties with social workers and queries relating to Tusla policies and procedures as well as relevant legislation.

Cork accounts for 19 per cent of all such cases and IFCA has continued to raise this issue with senior Tusla management in the area over a number of consecutive years. However, the numbers of callers to the helpline with specific issues persists.

The Midwest accounts for 15 per cent of cases which remain persistent.

Galway/Roscommon also accounts for a significantly large volume of cases citing communications difficulties with social workers (12 per cent).

IFCA has prioritised the above areas to seek solutions with the Tusla management teams to address the issues presented.

Fig: 6: Specific Roles of Social Workers with whom difficulties are experienced (as primary/secondary issue) 2017.

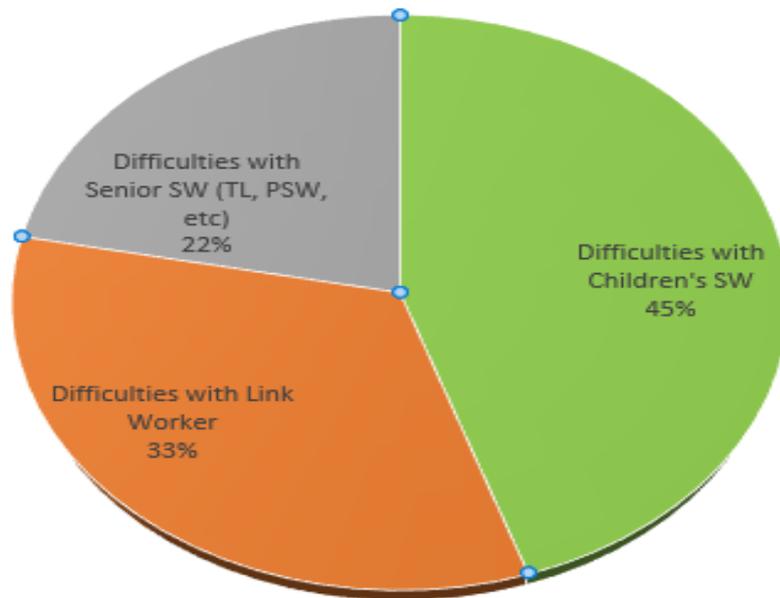
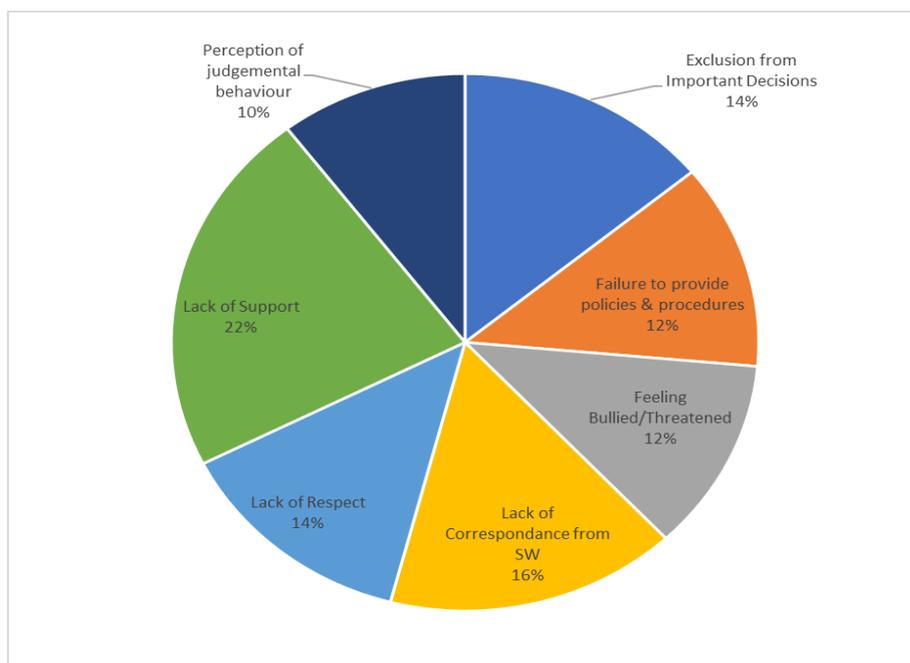


Fig: 7: Specific Communication Difficulties (as primary/secondary issue) 2017



Allocated Social Workers

The *National Standards for Foster Care* (Department of Health and Children, 2003) require that all children in care have an allocated social worker.

IFCA records this information for each caller when relevant (i.e. for carers only). The findings for 2017 are as follows:

A) *Carers with allocated Link Worker (2017): 72%. This percentage is less than the 2016 allocations of 84%*

B) *Carers where Child & Family Social Worker is allocated (2017): 73%. This percentage is less than 2016 which was 84%.*

These figures are representative of callers to the Helpline and vary with Tusla's 2016, and 2017 statistics for the numbers of both link and child in care social workers which was 82% and 91% respectively for Link allocated social workers, and 93% and 95% for child in care social workers.

It is important to note that the allocation of a social worker may not be an indication of the quality of support or supervision offered. IFCA is aware that Tusla is dedicated to increasing the volumes of allocated social workers for both foster carers and children in care, however many foster carers indicate that they infrequently have contact with their allocated link social worker.

IFCA advocates strongly for frequent and appropriate contact between foster carers and link social workers and children in care and child in care social workers to achieve a reciprocal quality relationship and the level of trust, respect and support required to promote stability in foster care.

IFCA continues to support Tusla in its drive to have more social workers to support the foster care system.

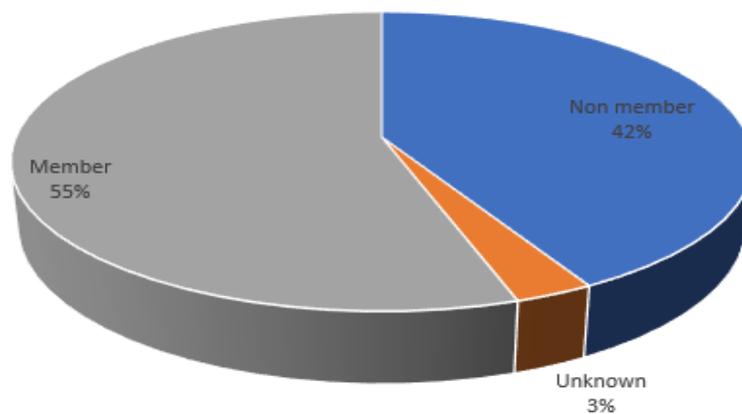
Membership Profile of Service Users

Emphasis was placed on determining the membership status of all those who used the service during 2017, thus significantly reducing the number of 'unknowns' as previously recorded. Being a non-member is not a barrier to service through the helpline although the allocation of a national support volunteer is reserved for members only.

During 2017:

- 55% of cases represented IFCA members
- 42% cases represented non-members.

Fig: 8: Membership status for cases: 2017

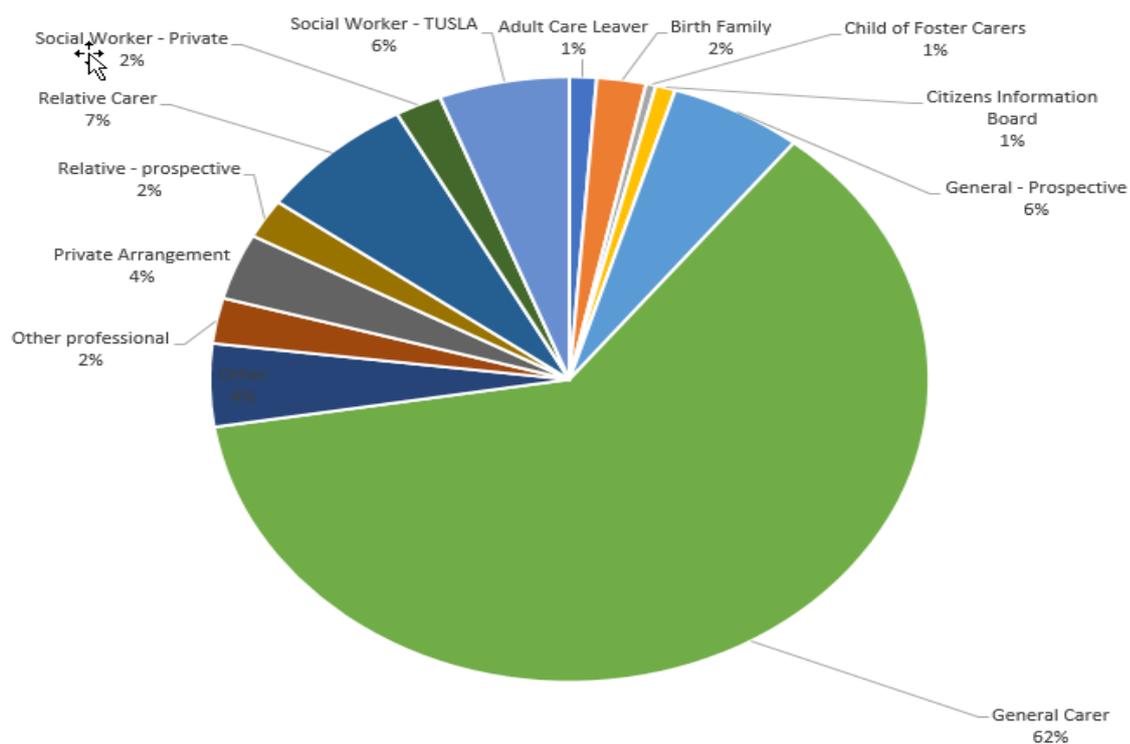


Callers by Type

- 62% general foster carers
- 7% cases related to relative carers
- 8% of all cases are from social workers - similar to 2016

4% relating to private placement arrangements. +42.64% increase from 2016.

Fig: 9: Caller Types for cases: 2017



Review of support cases nationally

As outlined previously in this report, where an IFCA member requires more in-depth assistance, the Head of Support reviews the case and may assign a Regional Support Volunteer to assist the individual. This may involve frequent scheduled phone contact and, in appropriate circumstances, meeting in person with that person.

In 2017, 109 cases were referred to support volunteers – an increase of 59 per cent on figures for 2016. Many of these cases are complex in nature. IFCA recruited additional support volunteers in response to this increased demand in 2017. However, the need to respond to the increased complexity of some cases will require additional national support volunteers to respond to the demand.

A challenge in allocating a national support volunteer to an individual who requires in-depth support can arise as a result of a number of factors, which include the complexity of the cases which require support; the need for in-person localised support; differences in timing and

scheduling of individuals; amongst others. This has presented a significant challenge to the service.

A national support volunteer will support up to three cases at any one time. To meet the demand for the service, coupled with the shortfall in national support volunteers, the Head of Support and the Support Service Coordinator have collectively been undertaking the support of over 70 per cent of such cases through phone, e-mail and in person.

Conclusion

The National Support Service was established by IFCA in 2013 to respond to the support needs of foster carers and those who are involved in foster care. Support volunteers are the backbone of the service, without whom it could not exist. Whilst the volume of calls to the helpline has remained almost static between 2016 and 2017, the nature of the issues which callers, mostly foster carers, are experiencing in their fostering role are complex and can impact significantly on the foster carer, the child in foster care and on the foster care family.

The service continues to grow and evolve in response to the needs of those involved in foster care and IFCA continues to learn from our work.

Trends from calls to the helpline have informed IFCA's work, for example, the development of an information booklet and the offering of information workshops on responding to Complaints and Allegations.

Equally, trends or issues identified inform IFCA's advocacy work across all domains, in particular with Tusla and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The introduction of a standardised approach and policy on After Care was welcomed, which saw some reduction in calls in respect of these issues, and feedback from carers has demonstrated a marked improvement in standardised approaches being taken in this regard.

This demonstrates the efficacy of IFCA and Tusla working collaboratively to support the delivery of foster care in Ireland.

It is important to note that, coupled with these positive developments, much work is required to standardise a wide range of policies which impact on foster care, so that both foster carers and social workers have clear policies, procedures and guidelines to inform the work.

The demands of fostering have undoubtedly increased, and the foster care system is required to have a robust infrastructure, human, financial and systems, to support it, so that the vast majority of children in care in Ireland can grow up experiencing family life.

It is of concern that the numbers of callers wishing to learn more about becoming a foster carer is reducing year on year. This is a figure to note for both Tusla and policy makers.

The Irish Foster Care Association is grateful for the support of the Support Service by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government under its Scheme to Support National Organisations.

