



IRISH FOSTERCARE  
ASSOCIATION SUBMISSION  
TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS  
COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN  
AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

March 27th 2019

## **IRISH FOSTER CARE ASSOCIATION**

### **1.0 Introduction**

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 Andrew Murphy IFCA. Andrew is a project worker with IFCA's National Support Helpline.

The Irish Foster Care Association is the representative body for foster care in Ireland and promotes excellence in foster care. IFCA has 2,036 members 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, Hubs and regions.
5. A National Annual Conference

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. We are in the process of appointing 3 additional staff, of whom 2 are funded by Pobal for a time limited period.

I have included some more information about IFCA in Appendix 2 with this opening statement.

## **2.0 IMPORTANCE OF FOSTER CARE IN IRELAND**

Foster Care is the backbone of care for children who are in the care of the State in Ireland. Ireland is unique in so far as the majority of children who are in the care of the State grow up experiencing family life, which is testament to the value of the importance of family in our society and this is reflected in our legislation. 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. 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. The recent report by the Irish Penal Reform Trust (2019)<sup>1</sup>, found that in general, children in foster care are not involved in juvenile justice. This is another positive indicator for children who grow up in foster care.

## **3.0 OVERVIEW OF FOSTER CARE IN IRELAND**

You've invited IFCA here this morning to talk about the recruitment and retention of social workers in Tusla. The role of the social worker is central to the care system in Ireland, for the child in care, and for the foster family.

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<sup>1</sup> Care and Justice (2019) Carr and Mayock.

The placement of children in care is legislated for in the Child Care Act 1991<sup>2</sup>, The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995<sup>3</sup>, and the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations 1995<sup>4</sup>, as amended, the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003<sup>5</sup>, all of which are underpinned by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Irish Government in 1991<sup>6</sup>.

Subsequent government policy, the *National Children's Strategy* (2000)<sup>7</sup>, *Brighter Outcomes Better Futures* (2011)<sup>8</sup>, the *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* (2014/2020)<sup>9</sup>, the *National Consultation Policy* (2015)<sup>10</sup>, and the *National Youth Strategy* (2015)<sup>11</sup>, 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 September 2018 there were 6044 children in care, of which 5573, (92% were placed in foster care; (26% in relative foster care). During the same period, there were 3287 foster carers on Tusla foster care panels.<sup>12</sup>

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 ordered capacity. Foster care is the predominant type of care for children in the Irish State. Foster families offer warm caring family life

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<sup>2</sup> The Child Care Act (1991) Department of Health

<sup>3</sup> The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995, Department of Health and Children.

<sup>4</sup> The Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives Regulations 1995, Department of Health and Children.

<sup>5</sup> The National Standards for Foster Care (2003), Department of Health and Children.

<sup>6</sup> UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), UNCRC.

<sup>7</sup> National Children's Strategy (2000) Department of Children and Youth Affairs, DCYA.

<sup>8</sup> Brighter Outcomes Better Futures (2014) Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

<sup>9</sup> The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014), Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

<sup>10</sup> National Consultation Policy (2015) Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> National Youth Strategy (2015) (DCYA).

<sup>12</sup> Tusla Quarterly Performance and Activity Data (2018).

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.

#### **4.0 TUSLA (Child and Family Agency) STATUTORY RESPONSIBILITY**

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. 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)<sup>13</sup>, which outlines the assessment process of prospective foster carers which are conducted by social workers. 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. Therefore, the role of the social worker is central to all aspects of foster care.

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<sup>13</sup> Tusla Guidelines and Procedures for Foster Care Committees (2017).

## **5.0 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. The National Standards sets out the requirements of the roles of the child in care social worker, and the link social worker, and the specific requirements are outlined in *Appendix 1*.

### **Standard 5**

*There is a designated social worker for each child and young person in foster care.*

### **Standard 14**

*Requires for the Assessment and Approval of foster carers by a trained and qualified social worker.*

### **Standard 15**

*Requires that approved foster carers are supervised by a professionally qualified social worker, known as the link worker, to ensure that foster carers*

*have access to the information, advice, and professional support necessary to enable them to provide high quality care.*

#### **Standard 16**

*Foster carers participate in the training necessary to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to provide high quality care.*

#### **Standard 17**

*Foster Carers participate in regular reviews of their continuing capacity to provide high quality care and to assist with the identification of gaps in the fostering service.*

The provision of both standard 16 and 17 are also a requirement of the link social worker. The above standards are clear in the requirement for social workers to carry out these statutory functions. Without the required numbers of social workers, there are significant pressures on our children in care system.

### **6.0 CHALLENGES**

Members, you have invited IFCA here today to discuss the challenges to the retention and recruitment of social workers in Tusla.

The requirements of the role of the social worker is many and varied, and it is for this reason that I have listed those requirements as set in the National Standards for Foster Care in appendix 1 of this paper. The child in care is required to have his/her social worker, and the foster carer is also required to have their own link social worker.

There are currently 6,044 children in care and over 4,523 foster families, all who require the services and support of a social worker.

IFCA is aware of the current shortfall of social workers and of foster families and children who, today, do not have an allocated social worker. The shortfall is acute in some local Tusla areas. The challenge in this is that the many requirements for children and foster carers, as required under the National Standards for Foster Care are not being met. For example, some foster carers do not have a link social worker. The impact of this is that they do not have access to supports as required, particularly when the foster carer themselves is identifying pressures building within the placement. 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 supports prior to the allegation being made<sup>14</sup>.

For the child, the absence of a dedicated social worker, does not allow them to build and maintain a meaningful relationship with the person who is charged with being their, “Corporate Parent”. It is important for children to develop a trusting relationship with their social worker, particularly if they are unhappy with any aspect of their placement.

On a very practical level, the child’s social worker is responsible for giving consent for all aspects of the child’s life; going on school tours, sleep- overs, travelling with the foster family. The absence of a social worker to give written consent, may mean that the child cannot partake in the normal everyday activities as other children.

IFCA is aware of the on-going strategies of Tusla to recruit more social workers, and as is true with any employer, key in the recruitment of staff is also their retention. It is noted that during 2018, whilst 142 social workers were

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<sup>14</sup> The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers. REES Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, (2016).

employed within Tusla, that 158 social work staff also left, as a result of retirement and movement to different sectors. This places great strain on Tusla to meet its statutory requirements for children in care and for foster carers. Analysis of the reasons for movement to other employment of any staff through exit interviews, informs an employer's staff retention strategies, and may inform Tusla of the causes for such movement.

It has also been suggested in presentations to the Committee by other contributors that the number of social worker graduates annually falls short of the requirements of Tusla, and that the Minister and her Department have initiated discussions with the third level institutions to seek solutions.

## **7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The rationale for setting out the role and responsibility of the child in care social worker, and the foster carer link social worker is to propose that some aspects of the role could be carried out by a transdisciplinary team to include a range of suitably qualified professionals.

*A transdisciplinary team a team composed of members of a number of different professions cooperating across disciplines to improve client care.*

Tusla could develop social work/allied health professionals, which provide a range of services and supports to children in care and to foster carers, supervised by a team leader social worker. The combination of roles and responsibilities could enhance the service to children and foster families appropriately, but also reduce some of the requirements of the social worker, enabling them to focus on the key statutory requirements of the role.

For example, a social care worker/ allied health professional could support the child during access visits with family members. They could also assist in coordinating care planning meetings or coordinate professional's meetings and

make referrals for specialist services for the child under the direction of the social work team leader.

Allied health care professionals could support foster carers in aspects of their role, doing one-one work with children whether practical or therapeutic, and offering timely support to foster carers with the link social workers retaining the supervisory role. All of this work would support the work of the social worker who always holds statutory responsibility.

Greater enhanced rights to foster carers could eliminate the requirement for the social worker to give consent and, where a child is in a long-term stable placement, the foster carer could assume more autonomy. IFCA has included this suggestion to DCYA in its submission in the review of the Child Care Act 1991.

Such supports to current social workers would reduce some of their core role as well as having a more manageable case- load, and thus, support retention.

## **7.0 PARTNERSHIPS**

Other supports to the role of the social worker could be to engage an organisation such as IFCA, the representative body for foster care in Ireland, to coordinate and offer training and support groups to foster carers, in collaboration with and on behalf of Tusla. IFCA is in the unique position in that it currently provides such services.

## **8.0 WORKING ENVIRONMENT**

Tusla takes a child into care where there is a concern for their welfare and protection. Front-line social work is demanding and challenging, and social worker staff working in this area require manageable case-loads and higher levels of support. Consideration could be made to having a lessened case-load,

higher levels of support and supervision, and offer an additional allowance to these staff to ensure retention, of skills and knowledge.

## **9.0 MENTORING**

The challenges of entering social work can be great and overwhelming for any new graduate. Consideration could be given to offering all new social work staff a mentor for the first twelve months in their new role. This will support the new social worker and provide them with access to expertise and knowledge as they embark on their new role within Tusla.

## **10. GROUP SUPERVISION**

Group supervision and peer support is evidenced as being of great support and learning to all staff. Having forums which offer regular peer support and shared learning would enhance the employment environment for new staff.

## **11. GENERATING MORE SOCIAL WORK GRADUATES**

The UK and NI universities offer social work qualifications to social care staff who wish to attain a qualification in social work. These qualifications are gained through a combination of in-work placement and part-time study. Currently, any post graduate student who wishes to study social work in Ireland, must return to college on a full-time basis. This is not feasible for many employed social work staff. Additionally, social care staff generally work in the areas of residential childcare homes, addiction and homelessness services, which offers them comprehensive insight into the challenges faced by children. These staff have a wealth of knowledge, skills and expertise to bring with them to study the requirements of social work. To attract such students, bursaries could be offered by Tusla to attract social care work staff to study social work in third level institutions who will provide this mode of study, and who would

then be required to remain in employment with Tusla for a defined period of time post-graduation.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

IFCA welcomes this opportunity to share its knowledge and experience of foster care in Ireland with the Committee, and our suggestions for the recruitment and retention of social workers in Tusla, who play a vital role in the area of children in care in Ireland, of whom there are 6,044. IFCA advocates for excellence in foster care in Ireland on behalf of our members, and we work in close collaboration with Tusla to achieve this. We are fully supportive of Tusla's drive to recruit and retain social work staff and offer our suggestions to support this.

Foster care is the backbone of the care of children in the State and requires a robust infrastructure to support it. Without social workers and the required supports this cannot be achieved.

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, or for the right to have a dedicated social worker to support them in their fostering role.

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, to achieve full complement of staff to meet the needs of both children in care and foster carers, we need to identify other ways to ensure that the requirements of the

National Standards for Foster Care are achieved. This may be achieved through the implementation of the suggestions proposed by IFCA today.

THANK YOU CHAIRPERSON AND MEMBERS

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## **Appendix 1 The National Standards for Foster Care - Roles and Responsibilities**

**The Child in care social worker's role is;** to co-ordinate the care of the children, and that they have responsibility for;

- ensuring Compliance with statutory requirements and standards
- arranging assessments
- drawing up care plans and ensuring decisions are implemented
- placing children in foster care
- arranging care plan reviews and ensuring that decisions are implemented
- ensuring that the views of children and their families are taken in to account and that they are enabled to participate in the care planning process
- visiting children in the foster home and meeting with them in private within the first six month of placement, at least every three months during the first two years of placement and at intervals not exceeding six months thereafter.
- working in partnership with families to maintain links and facilitate access where this in the best interest of children
- taking appropriate action in response to significant events and ensuring families are informed
- ensuring that the welfare of the children is promoted and that they are protected from abuse
- ensuring access to specialist services
- coordinating the input of other professional agencies

- keeping up to date case file in respect of each child that includes a record of each visit to the child
- explaining the complaints procedure to the children, providing a written copy of that procedure and assisting the children, where necessary, to complain about any aspect of their care.

**The Link Social Workers is required to;**

- Organise training
- provide regular supervision and support for foster carers and their children
- ensuring foster carers understand accept and operate within all relevant standards, policies and guidance of the health boards
- ensuring that foster carers receive all relevant information and advice about children including, background history, health, education, cultural, ethnic, religious and sexual development issues, vulnerabilities and risks, and information regarding neglect or abuse the children may have suffered
- providing foster carers with specific written information on, and explanations of, health board procedures to be followed should a child go missing from their care
- ensuring that counselling is available to foster carers and their children where a placement breakdown has occurred, or after critical events
- Meet with foster carers on a regular basis and have separate meetings with the foster carers own children
- Visit foster the foster care home with the child's social worker together to make arrangements for any new placement, and draw up an agreed placement plan

- Maintain a record of all contacts with foster carers, including issues discussed, requests for additional support and the response to these requests
- Foster carers are informed of their right of access to records pertaining to them
- Health Boards ensure that there are support groups for foster carers and their children in each local area
- An out of hours service is available to help foster carers in emergency situations and foster carers are informed in writing how to access this service

## **Appendix 2 - ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT IFCA**

### **1.0 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.

### **2.0 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 two part-time advocates and a number of trained support volunteers who offer direct support to foster carers in complex situations. Advocates attend complex meetings with foster carers to advocate on their behalf, and

support volunteers also accompany foster carers to meetings in a supportive role, primarily with Tusla. During 2018 the National Support Helpline received 900 calls.

### **3.0 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.

#### **4.0 IFCA BRANCHES and FOSTER CARE HUBS**

IFCA has a number of branches and foster care hubs nationally, and which are supported by volunteers and staff. They serve as an opportunity for foster carers to come together locally to share experiences, offer peer support and attend learning events. Activities and outing for foster carers and children are also organised.

IFCA hosts National Fostering Awareness Week each year which is a celebration of foster care in Ireland. Fostering Fortnight ran from March 4<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> inclusive this year and a number of events were held nationally and locally to bring those involved in foster care together. It also serves a platform for Tusla to recruit new foster carers.

IFCA holds an annual national conference which draws those in the foster care community together, including children in foster care.

IFCA offers a National Helpline for callers in respect of queries and issues associated with foster care. The Helpline is offered Monday – Friday from 11.00am to 3.00pm. During 2018, 900 calls were responded to.

#### **5.0 NATIONAL ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

IFCA hosts a national annual conference which brings together all those involved in foster care; foster carers, social workers, policy makers, academics, children in care and children who foster. IN 2018, 300 delegates attended the conference which is offered over three days in November. The conference offers an opportunity to learn and discuss issues and emergent trends in fostering.

## **6.0 FOSTER**

IFCA develops two Journals annually, entitled, FOSTER. We invite those working and living in the world of foster care to contribute articles which are shared with IFCA members and within the wider fostering community.