



**Report on the Gatherings,
hosted by IFCA in June & July
2021 to hear the experiences
of foster carers**

December 2021



Report on the Gatherings, hosted by IFCA in June & July 2021 to hear the experiences of foster carers

IFCA conducted focus groups with foster carers during the summer months of 2021, to hear their views on what is working for them and children in foster care. Foster carers were asked to reflect of what was not working, to identify the challenges they face in their day to day care of children and to name the supports required by them to overcome the challenges they experience.

The questions asked were:

- What is working well for you in your fostering role?
- What helps/ supports you?
- What should Tusla keep doing?
- What are the challenges within your fostering role for foster parents at present?
- What is not helpful to you in your fostering role?
- What would help you in your role?
- What should Tusla/ Alternative Care System stop doing?

Similar questions were asked about the positives and challenges for children in foster care;

- What is working well for the child in your care?
- What helps or supports the foster child in your care?
- What should Tusla continue to do for the foster child?
- What are the challenges for the foster child?
- What would help/support the foster child?
- What should Tusla/Alternative Care System stop doing for foster children?

This report provides an overview of the feedback given by the foster carers who attended the gatherings.

What is working well for you in your fostering role at present?

Positively shaping and contributing to a child's development.

For many of the foster carers the value of seeing the child in their care grow up and develop within their family was affirming.

The value and importance of a child centred approach being adopted by those around the child was also emphasised. In particular, it was noted that when the child is placed at the centre of care plans by social workers and where strong relationships exist with the birth parents, and the wider care team this serves to support the fostering role.

Being Valued as part of the Care Team

Foster carers valued being part of the care team around the child, of having their experience and knowledge of the child being recognised and used to inform care planning. Some foster carers spoke of the positive experience of being an active participant in the decision making and this helped to build connections with the care team and the child.

Peer support and buddy systems

Peer support featured in all focus groups as being a valuable source of support for foster carers, of feeling a sense of community and affinity with other carers and feeling safe to share their experiences and thought.

Autonomy and trust

The experience of fostering during Covid 19 was experienced positively as foster carers found they had increased autonomy over day to day decisions the COVID period in relation to the child's care. They spoke of the positive working relationship with social workers and of being, "entrusted" with day to day decisions. Foster carers expressed a greater sense of belonging within the child's lives during this period.

Consistency and permanency within placements

Permanency not only provides the child with security but also offers foster carers a sense of stability which supports their role in caring for the child.

Supports

The availability of support in the fostering role was emphasised by all participants.

The role of IFCA in supporting foster care was valued, as well as the services offered.

The new advocacy and counselling services were welcomed and used.

IFCA workshops and trainings, provided great opportunities for learning and support.

Having a social worker who shows empathy and communicates openly with the foster parents was valued, along with understanding and respect from the social workers for the

foster parent. Link workers who are collaborative and proactive were identified as being supportive and valuable.

The Involvement of external agency supports such as a guardian ad litem or other empowerment agencies, e.g Empowerment Plus further assists foster carers in their role.

What helps/ supports you in your role?

Inclusion, Clarity and Communication

Being included and experiencing real inclusion at meetings and decision making was important for foster carers along with transparency in terms of how meetings, and conversations are recorded by social workers. Foster carers noted the importance of them being informed of what is recorded about them. Foster carers placed value on access to independent advice and information.

Support

The importance of Support was highlighted. IFCA's Advocacy service was identified as being a significant support, especially for placement breakdowns.

Other supports identified included;

- Community and local supports
- Support from the child's school
- Accessible training – training which can be accessed easily either online or a short distance from home and which considers child care arrangements.
- Bespoke support for relative foster carers

What are the challenges for foster carers at present?

When asked this question, several themes emerged.

Exclusion and lack of collaborative practice

Foster carers spoke of being excluded from decision making without any specific reasons given at times and expressed a feeling of being viewed as insignificant in the care team around the child.

They expressed that they may be the only ones engaging with external services (CAMHS, disability services) and provide that information to the social work team but are then not privy to the assessment reports. This is a significant especially in situations where a diagnosis is given. Some noted a lack of urgency in Tusla seeking supports for children. Foster parents described feeling unsupported in their search for resources and services for the child.

The practice / policy of not allowing for care plan, or relevant reports and documents in respect of the child's care being shared with the foster parents makes it difficult to be fully

informed of the child's care needs.

Foster carers described circumstances where the new GDPR legislation has begun to hinder the foster parent's ability to care as they are unaware and not entitled to the background information of the child prior to accepting the child into the home. Information is being shared on a need-to-know basis only, judged by the social work team.

They described being "drip fed information" and that they have no rights to access information.

They also described the system as it currently is, as being disempowering for them.

Relationships with Social Workers

Relationships with social workers were described by foster carers as being 'cautious' in nature. They described some social workers as not knowing the child or the foster family, and working from a file, rather than building relationships. They spoke of the challenge of building a relationship with social workers, because of the high turnover of staff.

They described representation of them by social workers as being, "over-emotional" or incapable of understanding when it comes to situations where they are attempting to advocate for the child's needs. They expressed a feeling of being treated as if they are doing wrong by asking questions or seeking support.

They spoke of being accused of "influencing" the child when trying to advocate for the child's needs or expressed wants, and of having a lack of understanding regarding the child's needs.

Foster carers described a lack of trust in the system and with Tusla staff. They described experiencing a lack of transparency in relation to social work practice.

For some the lack of a positive relationship with the child's social worker gave rise to worry, confusion and anxiety.

Inconsistency within the system

Foster carers spoke of the constant turnover of staff / social workers which presents a challenge in the giving/receiving of information relevant to the child.

Foster carers spoke of the inconsistencies across the country, with different social workers interpreting situations differently and inconsistencies being experienced in terms of follow ups. They raised the issue of foster carers being treated differently across the different regions and differences also noted in the quality of support provided by private agencies and by Tusla.

The requirements of the legal system, specifically children being subject to different care orders, can lead to inconsistencies in terms of how children are responded to was also raised. This puts pressure on foster carers.

Social Worker Communication

Foster carers expressed concern re the risk of children's needs being lost in the poor

communication between the social worker and foster carer.

Lack of political will at a higher national level

Foster carers expressed a lack of political will to support foster care, citing that the foster care allowance had not been increased in 16 years. They also spoke of the lack of consideration regarding the need to review pensions for foster carers. They would like this issue to be advanced.

Poor support system

Overall, participants spoke of an overall lack of support to them in their fostering role, feeling they offer support to those involved in the child's life and care planning, but this is not matched in the support they are provided with. They expressed a lack of acknowledgement of the impact an allegation made against them has on them and their family.

Although the foster carers identified the need for support groups, there are a number of factors which can prevent foster carers from attending, such as support groups being located in areas that are not feasible to attend. Some carers spoke of feeling nervous or fearful in attending as they worried how Tusla would perceive their need for support. Some who have experience of attending Tusla support groups noted that the experience was more akin to attending training, rather than receiving support. Some expressed that supports offered felt more like a Tusla training session.

They referenced a lack of support outside of working hours and the impact of this in situations where the child may be struggling with a decision made by social workers. Foster carers spoke of having to support the child and explain the decision

Foster carers referenced the lack of support provided to them regarding changes in access arrangements for the child.

Adoption process and enhanced rights system

Foster carers acknowledged the challenges of moving from fostering to adoption, a process which they found to be difficult.

They identified the need for the process of enhanced rights to be reviewed especially in the case of children in voluntary long term care.

Wording of documents

The wording of documents can at times present a challenge for foster carers ,and clarity and explanations need to be given as to the meaning of what social workers are documenting. Equally how foster carers are spoken about in documents can be incentive and this practice needs to be changed.

Representation of Foster Carers in the Media

Foster carers spoke of the negative representation of foster parent role in the media and how this affects them and their family.

Aftercare policy and practice

Foster carers spoke of the challenges of the After Care Service which in their view is introduced to children too early, leaving children daunted and confused about their futures. They described the wording around aftercare as fear provoking for young people.

Access

Foster carers queried the value of advocacy / support for children in situations where they have expressed a wish not to attend access. It was acknowledged that access is emotive, giving rise to intense feelings foster carers have to support children with. Foster carers expressed the view that the feelings and behaviour of the child are often not fully understood by Tusla and the response to children inadequate. FC wanted the voice of the child to be heard, for systems to be in place whereby children's difficult experiences of access are seen for what they are, ie children struggling with their emotions and are validated.

Some suggestions on the improvements needed:

General supports required:

- More services and resources for the children, specifically for children experiencing mental health issues
- More peer supports and forums for foster parents
- In relation to Finance- the foster care allowance to increase, more funding into supports for the foster parents, particularly into peer support and setting up buddy systems for new foster parents . Pension improvement and progress in the discussions around pensions

Practice changes suggested:

- Child in care reviews need to be timed better, regularly and the reports after should be shared with the foster parents. Foster carers reported in some areas care plans are not shared with them.
- Foster carers to be able to access resources for children
- Social workers to have a greater awareness and understanding of the lived reality for foster carers, their contribution to the child's life to be valued and respected, opportunities to be created for foster carers to show and share their knowledge of the

child.

- Increased rights for foster carers in terms of giving consent, for eg, signing school permission slips.
- For teachers/ schools to work collaboratively with foster carers in meeting the child's needs
- Records of information and meetings to be shared, especially those that include foster parents' information. There are inconsistencies in practices across the Tusla areas.
- Improve methods of communication for foster carers, for example, creating an encrypted email system for foster parents as TUSLA /Social Workers often do not respond to emails for data protection reasons.
- Standardised practice and service provision country wide needed.
- Independent review on the way in which complaints or allegations are handled – suggestion that IFCA should investigate independently
- Risk management completed in partnership and collaboration with foster carers thereby valuing and including the views of foster carers.
- Clarity on the requirements and workings of GDPR in relation to the sharing of information with foster carers. Foster carers feel they are not trusted by the system to hold information about the child, that piecemeal information is shared with them
- For foster carers to be made aware of the requirements of GDPR as it relates to their role.
- Where there are staff changes, attention needs to be paid to how the new worker is introduced to the foster carer and child.
- Foster carers recognised that there can be factors outside of the foster carer – child relationship which may contribute to the placement ending but that less attention is paid to these. They would like social workers to engage in a fuller consideration of factors impacting on placement breakdown before a conclusion is arrived at.

Changes required in the Political and legal sectors.

- There needs to be political will to examine and change the fostering system.
- To raise the profile and improve understanding of what foster care is about.
- Pace of change needs to be quicker.
- Judges require specialist training so that they are better equipped to consider the needs of children in care.
- Enhanced legal representation for foster carers.

Communication and trust

- Foster carers identified the need for and value of improved relationships between social workers, particularly Child in Care social workers, and foster carers. Better communication generally across all members of the care team is required.
- Trusting foster parents with small decisions and valuing their opinions when it comes to bigger ones
- Investing in resources and infrastructure for social workers to improve their communications – outdated phones and systems for the social workers impact on social work engagement with foster carers .
- There needs to be an open discussion between the child in care social worker and foster carers in relation to the parenting approach the child requires in light of their experiences. Foster carers felt that social worker advice at times is ‘at odds’ with the way their home operates

Views shared in respect of the children being cared for:

What is working well for the child in your care?

Foster carers identified a number of practices and supports which assist children in their care, namely:

- Consistency and permanency- this provides a feeling of stability for children.
- Routine and maintaining a routine within the foster carer home works well for children.
- Continuation of relationships with the child if the placement breaks down.
- Approval of long-term placements where the child can settle.
- Security- coming from being in a stable placement with consistent social workers- and knowing what to expect.
- Being part of a family unit.
- Relationship building with the foster family. The experience for foster carers during Covid 19 lockdowns was largely positive. With reduced demands on children in terms of school attendance, appointments, and face to face family contact, foster carers found that opportunities were created to build a deeper relationship with the child.
- Access to a range of external support services such as CAMHS, St Bernard’s Children’s Services, Tipperary and EPIC.
- Access to SNA’s in the schools.
- Local supports/ community and societal involvement aids the emotional and social development of children.
- Learning information and skills which interest them.
- Feeling “Normal” and having lives similar to their friends.

- Lack of frequent contact with social workers created a sense of belonging within the family home
- Being treated the same as other children within the home.
- Good and supportive care team.
- Experienced Care workers.
- Consistent social workers.
- Social workers or aftercare workers who explain the fostering system thoroughly.
- Adults who are positive and encourage the child.
- Consistent access.
- When adults can adapt to the needs of the child.

What are the challenges for the child in your care?

After Care

Foster carers identified the policy and process around after care as problematic for young people. Some spoke about the instability that conversations regarding after care can trigger in young people. Young people can begin to worry about their continued living relationships, their place in the family and feel uncertain about their future. How conversations are had with young people is important and social workers/ after care workers need to be able to engage with young people in a sensitive and meaningful way.

Paperwork/ Wording of documents

Foster carers identified the lack of access to age-appropriate documents for children. They described documents as either being too advanced for some children and too child-like for older teenagers. They also referenced the practice of giving foster parents paperwork to show young babies or toddlers so that social workers could record information was given to children.

Lack of trust in the system

Foster carers described how previous poor relationships with social workers impacts on a child's capacity to engage with new social workers. They cited children as feeling unheard or not listened to.

They described the care system as not being reliable, being inconsistent and always changing in terms of social work staff which impacts on children's capacity to form relationships. The experience for children of moving placements also contributes to feelings of insecurity and a lack of trust in the adults around the child. Greater attention needs to be paid to the building of security and trust for children in care.

Insufficient services and difficulties access services.

Foster carers identified long waiting lists, and difficulties accessing services such as mental health services, as contributing to poor outcomes for children.

Access

Some foster carers spoke of difficulties in relation to supporting children around family contact with these difficulties being exacerbated by a lack of routine, structure and regularity in the access arrangements . This leads to children feeling worried and anxious which can be expressed in their distressed behaviour.

What would help/support the foster child?

Foster carers identified the following as the necessary supports to help children:

- A clearer understanding of their own individual situations and what their future plan may consist of so that they can settle and integrate into their foster families – in particular in relation to long term care where children are waiting to go home and do not allow themselves to feel secure with foster parents.
- Resources for birth parents to assist them understand the child's perspective and the meaning of care for children.
- **Re Access**
 - Children to be involved in the decision making around family contact,
 - Improved environments and comfortable visits for the children. Current settings set birth families up to fail as the children are not comfortable in the environment
 - The regular review of access to ensure it is still meeting the best interest of the child .
 - Better understanding of the significance of access by all those in the care team.
- **Relationships**
 - Social workers to recognise the barriers children experience in forming relationships with others.
 - Focus on staff retention and keeping consistency for children
 - Place emphasis and value on the child's relationships
- **Adoption**
 - Greater promotion of adoption.
- **Training**
 - Courses in mental health for the foster parents if the services are not provided by the state.
 - Behavioural management training to help reduce placement breakdown.
- **Normality**

Create normality for the foster children – support the foster carers in creating normality and work at the child's pace to reduce the experience of feeling different to the child's peer group.

Conclusion

The outcome of the focus groups held in June and July 2021 offer insight into areas of foster care that are working well for foster carers and children in foster care . The views gathered also highlight areas for change, some which can be achieved through better communication systems, developing a culture of value and respect of foster carers, and the promotion of equity and respect amongst all those who are included in the Care Team to support the child in foster care. Access and the After Care system for children was also a consistent theme which warrants attention.

Of note is the sentiment expressed by foster carers of the fear of advocating for the child, fear of seeking support and challenging the system continues. This is also a sentiment experienced by foster carers who sought the support of IFCA's National Advocacy Service. This requires attention if foster care is to be maintained as the preferred care option for children who are received into the care of the State.

Systemic challenges, such as the recruitment and retention of social workers remains a challenge.

The recognition of foster carers through reviewing the foster care allowance and the recognition of a pension at the end of the fostering career, for foster carers who gave up employment, (as required), to foster also requires attention . IFCA will advocate on these issue in 2022 .

IFCA recommends that the issues identified in this report informs a review of some aspects of foster care, namely;

- The After Care System:
 - *IFCA has completed a review of the National After Care Policy in conjunction with EPIC and has identified a range of changes required to policy and practice which will support young people as they navigate this significant transition . The submission, currently in the final stages of completion, also points to the need for a more inclusive approach to engaging foster carers in the identification and planning of after care supports. Members will be notified when the final submission is available for viewing.*
- Prioritisation of children in care for assessments and services, as stated in the National Standards for Foster Care
- A themed inspection by HIQA to identify if children in care are being prioritised for State services
- An external review of placement breakdowns, to elicit learning and practice.

- Continued advocate supports for foster carers.
 - *IFCA now has an established counselling service which foster carers can access through the National Advocacy service. This service is free of charge and provides bespoke support to foster carers .*
- Regular support and supervision for foster carers.
- Where possible, a consistent allocated social worker for children in care and link social worker for foster parents
- Co create a culture of mutual value and respect for foster carers within the Care Team surrounding the child.

To advance the issues raised at the gatherings IFCA will now seek to meet with the Department of Children, Equality, Integration, Disability and Youth (DCEIDY) and with Tusla. Feedback from the Gatherings, including challenges and suggestions for changes , will be shared and discussed with the DCEIDY and Tusla with a view to identifying areas for joint working to promote improvements in the foster care system.

Members will be kept informed of to the progress and outcomes of these meetings.