Budget 2023 Submission

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Irish Foster Care Association

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1. Introduction

1.1 Foster Care and IFCA

The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) believes in the value of foster care as an effective alternative for children who – for various reasons – are unable to live with their own families. At end of the third quarter of 2021, there were 5,841 children in care – 3,782 of those children were in general foster care and 1,489 were being fostered by a relative.

At end of the same quarter, there were 4,018 foster carers broken down as follows:

- General foster carers: 2,437;
- Relative foster carers: 1,057;
- Private foster carers (non-statutory): 524.

Foster care is complex and foster carers require a range of supports and expert advice to enable them provide the best possible care for the child/children in their care. IFCA is the national organisation providing such support and advice to foster families and the wider fostering community:

- We advance and promote best practice in foster care through support, advocacy and learning provision – based on evidence-based research and best practice – for all those involved in foster care;
- IFCA advocates for foster carers at both a local level and at a national level by lobbying for and behalf of foster carers and the issues impacting on the lives of the children in their care.

1.2 Supporting Foster Care

All of the research shows children in care do much better in a foster family context than they do in an institutional setting – although we recognise that on occasion it is in the best interests of particularly vulnerable children that they are placed in such settings.

Ireland is unique in being able to provide foster family-based care for such a high proportion of children in care, however, our ability to continue to do so is coming under considerable strain as the current cohort of foster carers is getting older and it is proving more and more difficult for Tusla to recruit new foster families.

Based on feedback from our members, part of the reason for this scenario is that the financial supports offered by the State to help foster families take care of a child in care has not increased since 2009. This submission sets out what needs to be done in order to ensure that we retain as many foster families as possible and recruit new carers so that we can continue to offer as many vulnerable children as possible the option of family-based care – where they thrive best.

The retention and recruitment of new foster carers has been highlighted as an issue as the number of approved foster carers on the panel of approved foster carers has fallen year on year since 2016 and is down 11% (502) overall. Investment in foster carers is required if this trend is to be reversed.

2. Main Proposals

2.1 Foster Care Allowance

Foster Care Allowance is provided by the State in order to allow foster carers to meet all of the daily living needs of the child (or children) they are fostering such as food, clothing, school uniform, school books, extra-curricular activities, school trips, pocket money (depending on the age of the child), and treats such as toys/games/holidays.

Currently there are two weekly rates of Foster Care Allowance:

- For children aged 0 – 12yrs €325.00
- For children aged 12yrs + €352.00

The Allowance was last increased in 2009 (and that was by €6.00 per week and the previous increase was in 2000) and, as of, I July 2022 prices have increased by 15% since that last increase (according to the CSO inflation calculator). It's expected that by the end of the year, prices will have increased by over 20%.

The fact that the Foster Care Allowance has fallen well behind the cost of living is posing real difficulties for foster carers and the children they care for. As one of our members pointed out to IFCA recently:

"Currently I have a 14-year-old foster daughter with Epilepsy and ADHD. I have to travel to numerous monthly appointments to meet her hospital consultants, CAMHS psychiatrist, occupational therapist and psychologists for CBT sessions.

"All of these professionals have recommended that she continues with her sports (field and inline hockey) to regulate her emotions and energy levels (ADHD with an emphasis on the hyperactivity). This entails driving her to training sessions five times a week and to matches in neighbouring counties. It also involves buying her expensive protective equipment (she is goalie in field hockey). I literally cannot afford the petrol or membership subscriptions anymore as our food bills are soaring. And I will have to seriously consider culling her activities soon unless the Foster Care Allowance increases".

As another member put it:

"We are looking after the most wonderful children and they are entitled to have a realistic Foster Care Allowance to help them blossom!"

It's also worth bearing in mind that the cost of a child in a residential setting in 2020 was up to **20 times more expensive** than a child placed with a foster carer: the residential cost varied between **€6,000-€6,800 per week** whereas the Foster Care Allowance is **€325-€352 per week** depending on the age of the child. If the Allowance is not increased to a realistic level so that it actually meets the child's living costs, then the State will be forced to rely evermore on this much more expensive option – and one that does not work as well from the child's perspective.

So, coming back to the cost of living, to bring the Foster Care Allowance up to date with 2022 prices, it would have to increase by over 20%. However, September's Budget is for 2023 so it has to take into account likely price rises next year so on this basis, IFCA is proposing a flat **€100** increase to both Allowances so that they are brought up to date for 2022 and future-proofed for 2023.

Finally, in relation to the Foster Care Allowance, it is important for the child that they are treated the same as every other child at the most important time of the year from a child's perspective, Christmas. In this context, there should be a double-week payment of the Allowance in the run-up to Christmas to cover the costs of presents/clothing and other items for the child.

2.2 After Care Allowance

For young people who remain living with foster carers after the age of 18 years and continue in education /training, an Aftercare Allowance of €300 is paid. The purpose of the allowance is to cover the day-to-day costs associated with supporting the young adult as they progress in education or accredited training.

So, on reaching 18 years, the Foster Care Allowance of €352 ceases and is replaced with an aftercare allowance of €300. This reduction comes at a time of increased costs for foster carers in supporting the young person during a period of significant change, very often in the final year of school when there are additional costs for exams, grinds, graduations and increased socialising.

This €52 per week reduction means that foster carers are often left in a position whereby they have to subsidise (from their personal resources) the cost of caring for the young person.

IFCA is requesting that there is an increase in the After Care Allowance to match any increase in the Foster Care Allowance. In this context, we are proposing that the rate needs to be increased to at least **€452 per week.**

2.3 Mileage Costs

Foster carers are expected to transport children to access visits with family members, medical appointments, school (which at times can be outside the area in which the foster family resides), travel to community activities, summer camps. In addition, they need to transport the child to avail of therapies and support (counselling/ psychological support, play/art therapy) – all of which are part of the child's care plan.

At the moment, there are no mileage costs for foster carers unless 'the distance travelled to facilitate access arrangements (to the family of origin) is considered excessive' (Tusla's *'National Policy: Payments/Allowances in Foster Care, Aftercare, Supported Lodgings and Adoption Maintenance')* and excessive is a round trip of over 150 kms and then it's only the excess that is covered.

IFCA is asking for mileage costs to be covered from the point of leaving the home- no excess – and the rate to be in line with travel allowance given to Tusla staff.

2.4 Setting Up Allowance

As was mentioned earlier, the Foster Care Allowance is for the daily living expenses of the child placed with the foster family. However, there is no support for the initial 'one-off' start-up costs incurred by foster carers who receive children into their home. These costs are very evident in the first time placement of babies and infants – many of whom arrive with very little belongings in terms of clothing, shoes and equipment such as:

- Cots/beds;
- Cribs;
- Buggies/prams;
- Car seats;
- Safety household items;
- Other baby essentials.

However, set up costs are experienced across the different age ranges of children who are removed into care. We know that many of the children and young people who enter care have experienced high levels of neglect at home, reflected in the fact that neglect and welfare concerns feature as the main reasons children are removed from the care of their parents.

In this context, one foster carer noted '*I have had five children come to me over the last 12 years, not one of them had more than the clothes on their back and the allowance isn't immediate or sufficient for set-up costs'*

In this context, we are proposing a 'one-off' Setting Up Allowance set at a minimum rate of **€350 but going up to €500 per child/young person**.

2.5 Extend Back to School Allowance

The Government provides a Back to School Allowance to thousands of parents each year to provide support around costs like school uniforms, books, sports clothing and equipment. Currently, this is not available to foster carers and, as such, they have to absorb the many additional school costs and pay these from their own resources. This is highlighted by one foster carer who commented:

'Our daughter starts secondary school next September. We are asked to pay out for a computer which is for school only and is locked into the curriculum of the school at a cost of €750. New Uniform € 500 approximately and P.E. gear €300.

'Booklists finishing cost still to be determined due to price increases by printers, etc € 500.

'Over €2,000 needed for one month alone and not as much as a bag of crisps for lunch included'.

IFCA is asking that access to this Allowance be extended to foster carers for the benefit of the children in their care.

2.6 Ongoing Review

As this submission has already pointed out, the Foster Care Allowance has only been increased twice in the last 23 years – in 2000 and 2009. Not surprisingly, given the intermittent attention it has received, the Allowance no longer achieves its objective of adequately covering the daily living costs of the child in care.

In order to make sure these costs are properly covered from now on, the Foster Care Allowance should be index-linked and subject to a three-yearly review.

3. Additional Issue

3.1 State Pension Eligibility

Currently, the investment in time and care by foster carers in the children they look after do not trigger contributions or credits for the State Contributory Pension leaving foster carers at risk of poverty in their later years – despite the fact that they are providing a valuable service to the children and the State. Clearly, this an issue of equity and fairness to the foster carers.

However, it is also one that directly impacts vulnerable children. As this submission has already pointed out, research consistently shows that foster care provides the best outcomes for the child that needs to go into care. The State is finding it increasingly difficult to recruit foster carers and one of the reasons is because they are not eligible for the State Contributory Pension.

To rectify this situation, foster carers should receive credits for their years of service as a foster carer – including their years being available for placement on Tusla's approved panel of foster carers.

IFCA has provided a submission to the Commission for Taxation and Social Welfare in support of the need to address these anomalies in pensions for foster carers.

4. Costings

The proposed flat €100 per week increase to the Foster Care Allowance would cost €21 million in 2023, bringing the total cost of the Allowance to the State of €109 million.

In addition, the provision of a double-week Foster Care Allowance for the child's Christmas costs, would cost an additional €2.1 million.

The projected costs of the other proposed measures are as follows:

After Care Allowance increase	€11 million
Mileage (estimated allocation of €2,000 per child)	€12 million
Setting Up Allowance (based on 200 infants and 450 older children)	€250,000
Access to Back to School Allowance	€1.5 million

The combined total additional cost of all of the measures proposed in this submission would be just short of €48 million in 2023.

5. Conclusion

IFCA wishes to thank the Departments of Finance; Public Expenditure and Reform; Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth – as well as the Ministers at the Departments – and Oireachtas members for the opportunity to make this submission.

We trust that the views expressed will be given due consideration in the deliberations over Budget 2023 and the measures that flow from that.

We submit that the measures proposed should be raised by all in whatever forum is appropriate, in particular with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

We would be glad to expand on our proposals at a meeting or in another appropriate forum.