

The logo for the Irish Foster Care Association is contained within an orange speech bubble. The text inside the bubble is arranged in three lines: "Irish" in blue, "Foster Care" in orange, and "Association" in blue.

**Irish
Foster Care
Association**

Annual Report 2021

A decorative graphic consisting of a thick, dashed orange line that winds across the page. Along this line are several small white circles. Scattered around the line are various icons: yellow hearts, green houses, teal trees, and teal paper airplanes.

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Raymond Nolan, Chairperson; Sandra Duffy, Vice Chairperson;
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Vickery; Dr Helen Gogarty; Joe Cullen; Paula Farrell; Mary Hickey;
Riccardo Panza; Rita Martin; Harold Barber

Chairperson's Statement



Dear Members,

I am delighted to present IFCA's 2021 annual report to you. 2021 was a very special year for IFCA, as we celebrated its 40th Anniversary. IFCA was founded in 1981, and we are reminded of the vision of IFCA back then which was, *"to promote the value of family life for children in care, and to include and support all those involved in foster care"*. As Chairperson of IFCA in 2021, I am proud that the vision as articulated back in 1981 continues, where all involved in foster care are supported by the Association.

This is a very important distinction of IFCA's work, as we seek to raise the importance of the foster care family in the life of the child in care, and to include in our support, all those working for this objective.

With this objective to the fore, IFCA's work in 2021 offered a range of services to our members, and others to support children in foster care. I am proud that all our direct services by our staff team continued to be delivered on-line as required by public health guidance. It is heartening that some of our branches were able to offer family outings towards the end of the year when public

health restrictions began to ease. It was a great opportunity for children in care, and foster families to reconnect.

We had other reconnections during the year with IFCA continuing to offer its on-line annual national conference, inviting guest speakers from the US. The numbers of participants attending on-line learning events and courses during 2021, as evidenced in this report, demonstrates the hunger for continued learning amongst the fostering community.

2021, was also a challenging period for some foster care families, and children in foster care, and our Helpline and Advocate teams supported a high number of families.

A focus of the Board during 2021, was a full review of the Charity Regulator Code, ensuring that IFCA is in full compliance. A second focus for the Board, was a move towards the centralisation of branch bank accounts, in compliance with good governance. There was some delay in this process because of Covid-19 restrictions, and it is envisaged that this project will conclude in 2022.

Another focus of the Board was the seeking of additional sustainable funding from Tusla, to allow IFCA to continue to deliver its services to foster care families. These discussions are on-going. It is important that IFCA has adequate resources to continue to independently support foster care families who become involved in complex fostering situations. Our advocacy team supported thirty foster care families where children in care experienced a placement breakdown. It is the aim of IFCA to provide independent support to foster care families, and ultimately children in care, in order to seek to support and maintain children's placements, where they can continue to feel secure and thrive.

I would like to thank my fellow Board directors who gave their time to IFCA during 2021 in a voluntary capacity, our CEO and staff and all of our volunteers who support IFCA in the delivery of our work.

Raymond Nolan

Raymond Nolan
IFCA Chairperson



Chief Executive Review



It is a privilege to report the high level of activity delivered by IFCA and its staff during 2021, a year in which we celebrated 40 years supporting foster care in Ireland, 1981 - 2021. There were significant increases in our Advocacy and Learning services, and the development of a new Counselling Service, to support foster carers.

The continuum of learning events on-line, since early 2020, facilitated over one thousand foster carers and social workers from a broad geographical spread to engage with on-line learning. This has proved a great success, with IFCA reaching a new cohort of members, whom, heretofore could not travel to learning events because of the time pressures of foster care. We were delighted to see a range of joint learning events between social workers and foster carers, with the outcome of shared learning and understanding of fostering.

2021 also saw IFCA's second on-line conference which was attended by over two hundred participants. We were delighted to see such a great turnout to hear eminent guest speakers from the US, Dan Hughes and Jon Baylin. We acknowledge with thanks, sponsorship of the conference from

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in recognition of IFCA's 40 years of supporting foster care in Ireland.

Supporting foster care is core to IFCA's work, and inherent in this is supporting our foster carers as they navigate the day to day demands of fostering children in care. IFCA's National Helpline and National Advocacy Service is available to offer support to foster families in times of need, or indeed crisis. The introduction of our new web chat function on IFCA's website has facilitated a greater number of foster carers to access our service after hours, which is welcome. Issues arising as a result of Covid-19, continued to challenge some foster care families, in particular with issues of access and vaccinations and in the completion of fostering assessments. We continue to see underlying themes of challenges in communication between foster carers and Tusla fostering teams, and challenges which arise from the absence of, or inconsistencies in the application of relevant Tusla policies and procedures. IFCA seeks to support foster carers who experience such happenings, with strategies for constructive dialogue with their local Tusla teams.

IFCA's National Advocacy Service continues to support foster carers with complex fostering issues, the two prominent issues being allegations of abuse made against foster carers, or placement breakdowns. A case study in this report offers an example of how one foster care family was supported by the Advocacy Service with the outcome of maintaining the placement of two children in care who have very complex needs.

Another area of support for foster carers is local support through IFCA's Branches and Hubs. The absence of face-to-face support because of Public Health Guidelines, proved challenging for a second year, with a slow return to offering outings for children and foster families in late December. I would like to acknowledge with thanks all our volunteers who made this possible.

A core objective of IFCA's work is to contribute to excellence in foster care in Ireland. Two issues of Foster, IFCA's journal were published in 2021. Issue 11 offering contributions from speakers from IFCA's 2020 Annual National Conference and Issue 12 focussing on personal contributions by people whose lives have all been touched by foster care. 2021 saw a wide range of important consultations with IFCA members to contribute to IFCA's Policy and Advocacy Work.

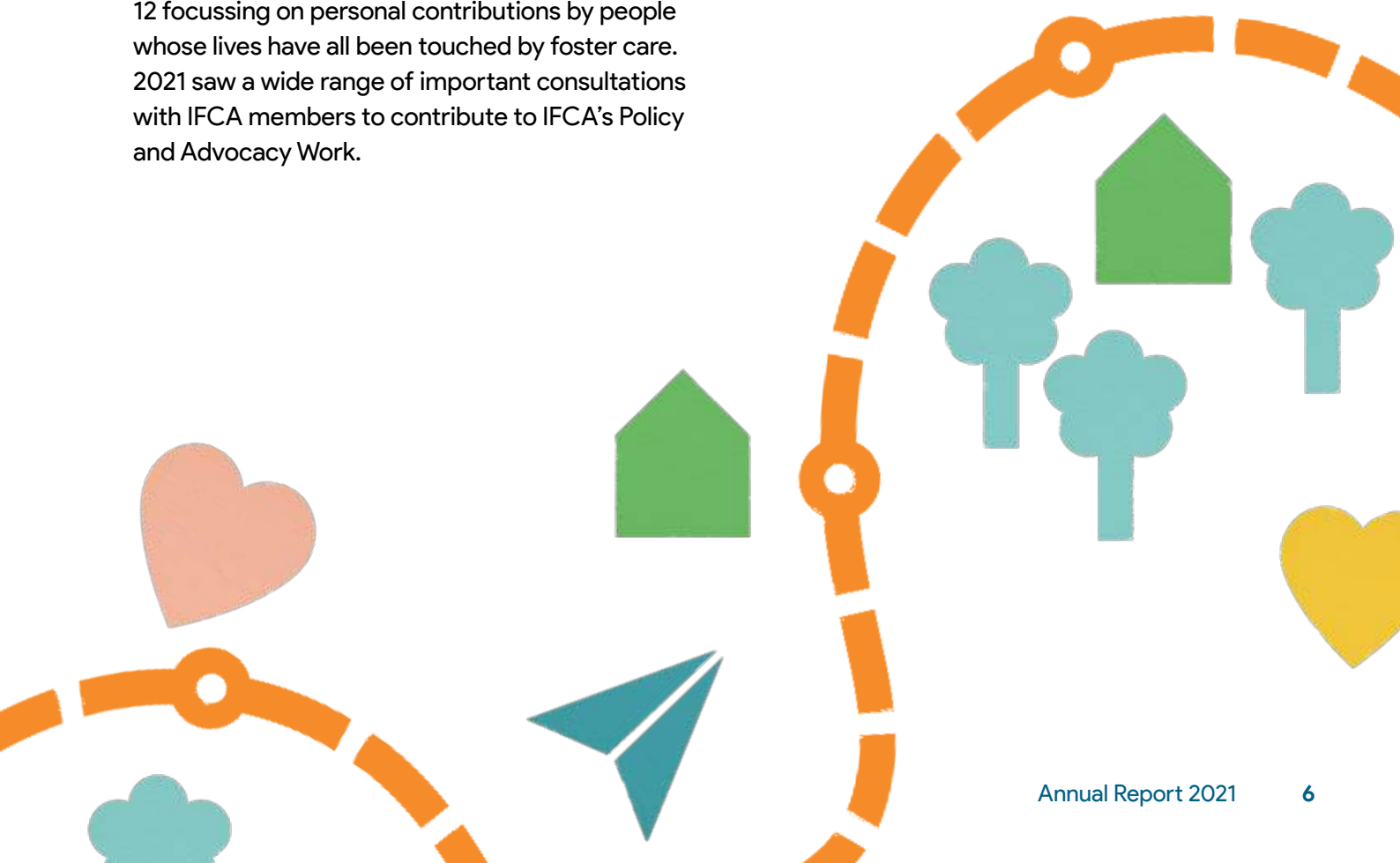
On-line consultations, with members, were held to inform five important policy issues which impact on foster care. One of these consultations, IFCA's Gatherings, are an opportunity for IFCA members to meet with representatives of IFCA's Board and staff. A detailed account of each consultation is outlined in this report.

I would like to thank IFCA's Board, staff and volunteers for their contribution to IFCA's work on behalf of our members and foster care.

I would also like to thank our funders and supporters without whom we could not have continued our offerings to support foster carers and those in fostering in 2021.



Catherine Bond



A Year in Numbers



Consultations

Significant proposed changes to government and statutory agency policies were a focus of 2021, on which IFCA consulted with its members. Consultations were held with members nationally on a range of identified policy for change issues, which included:

1. IFCA/ EPIC Joint Aftercare Submission
2. Tusla Child Abuse Substantiation Policy (CASP)
3. Allocation of a single social worker to a dual role in a stable foster placement
4. National Gatherings for foster carers
5. HIQA Draft National Standards for Children's Social Services

IFCA appreciates the views and experiences of our members to assist in formulating our position on issues in respect of foster care. We would like to thank all those who contributed to focus groups consultations during 2021.



IFCA/EPIC Joint Aftercare Submission

How this impacts on foster carers:

Between January and December 2021, IFCA conducted a joint review with EPIC on Tusla's National Aftercare policy, 2017. Current policy provisions direct how young people will be provided for and supported as they transition to adulthood at 18 years of age. This has implications for foster carers, many of whom will continue to be the key person and the key support in the life of the young person transitioning into adulthood.

IFCA's Role:

IFCA established a working group with EPIC and completed a methodical review of all provisions in the current policy and set this review against the experiences of foster carers, as communicated to IFCA via our National Helpline Service and National Advocacy Service. IFCA hosted two focus groups, one of which had a special focus on the needs of young people with disabilities in aftercare. IFCA worked with EPIC on the drafting and dissemination of a questionnaire to ascertain the views and experiences of young people availing of aftercare services and residing with their foster families.

Key Points:

IFCA recommends the policy needs to be revised and changes made including the concept of the continuum of care to be incorporated into the policy and aftercare supports should remain in place until the young person is twenty six years. The role of the foster carer in preparing and supporting the young person in care needs to be explicitly stated in the policy. Currently their contribution and value is not acknowledged in the policy with foster carers feeling 'invisible' in the process. Foster carers need to be included in the assessment of need process and their inclusion to be formalised. The policy needs to take account of the challenges experienced by young people in their continued engagement in formal education. Taking breaks in education should be facilitated without any adverse impact on the allowances paid. The policy also needs to consider those young people who do not wish to pursue further education. There should be no disparity in service provision and supports given to those in and outside of education. All young people in care should be allocated an aftercare worker. Young people who live outside their area of origin should receive aftercare supports where they currently reside (and not from the area of origin). This enables the young person to make connections in the locality.

Outcome/ Next Steps:

The joint submission (finalised in 2022) will be shared with Tusla and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and members. The findings will be considered in Tusla's formal internal review of the National Aftercare policy.



Tusla Child Abuse Substantiation Policy

How this impacts on foster carers:

The Child Abuse Substantiation Policy will replace Tusla's 2017 Interim policy for Managing Allegations of Abuse, Concerns and Complaints. It sets out the steps to be followed when an allegation is made against a foster carer and provides timelines for the completion of the investigation process. A significant change within this policy is that Tusla recommends any person who receives communication from Tusla of an allegation of abuse, seeks legal advice and are encouraged to bring a support person to any meeting with Tusla. The policy also supports the sharing of documentation gathered in the course of the investigation with those whom an allegation of abuse has been made.

IFCA's Role:

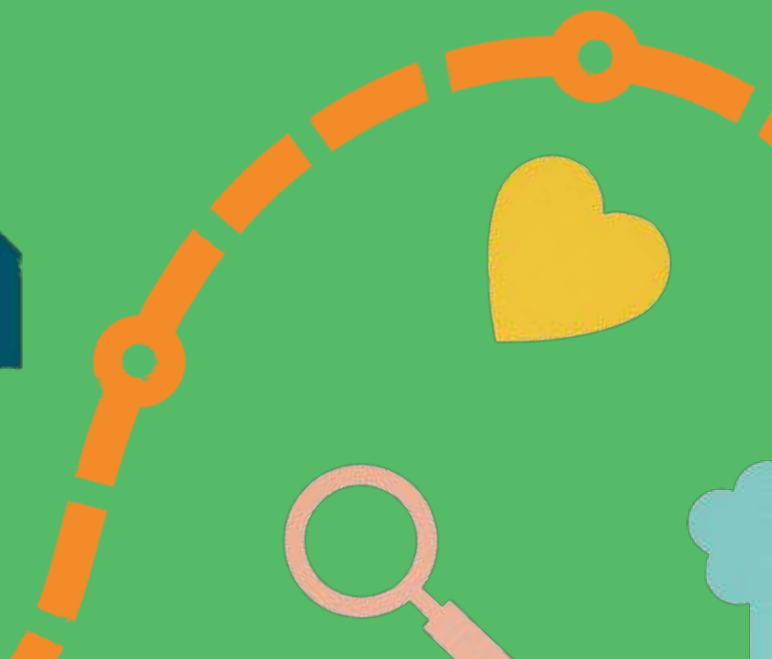
IFCA engaged in stakeholder consultations with Tusla, reviewed the draft policy and all supporting documents to formulate a submission paper. This position paper was also informed by the experiences of members communicated through IFCA's National Helpline and National Advocacy Service, all of which were shared with Tusla. IFCA also completed Tusla's on-line consultation forum. Notice of public consultation dates with Tusla were communicated to members with members encouraged to attend and share their views. IFCA advocated with Tusla for training on the policy to be provided to foster carers.

Key Points:

Each new Tusla region will have a dedicated CASP social work team responsible for the investigation and substantiation of allegations of abuse made against foster carers. Foster carers will receive written details of the allegation when met with by the CASP social worker and copies of all relevant information and documentation gathered in the substantiation process are given to the foster carers. Foster carers are encouraged to seek legal advice and can bring a legal advisor or a support person to meetings with the CASP social worker. When an outcome is reached, a provisional conclusion is provided to the foster carer and an opportunity to respond is given. A final outcome is only arrived at after this. The policy allows for foster carers to request a review of the outcome if the allegation is founded. This review is independent of Tusla, the details of which are shared with the foster carer.

Outcome/ Next Step:

Tusla's CASP policy came into effect on 27th June 2022. IFCA continues to monitor the implementation of the policy as it relates to the experiences of foster carers.



Allocation of a single social worker to a dual role in a stable foster placement

How this impacts on foster carers:

This proposed development would see the introduction of a “dual role” allocated social worker, who would hold case responsibility for both the foster carer and the child in care in cases where placements were deemed long term and stable.

IFCA's Role:

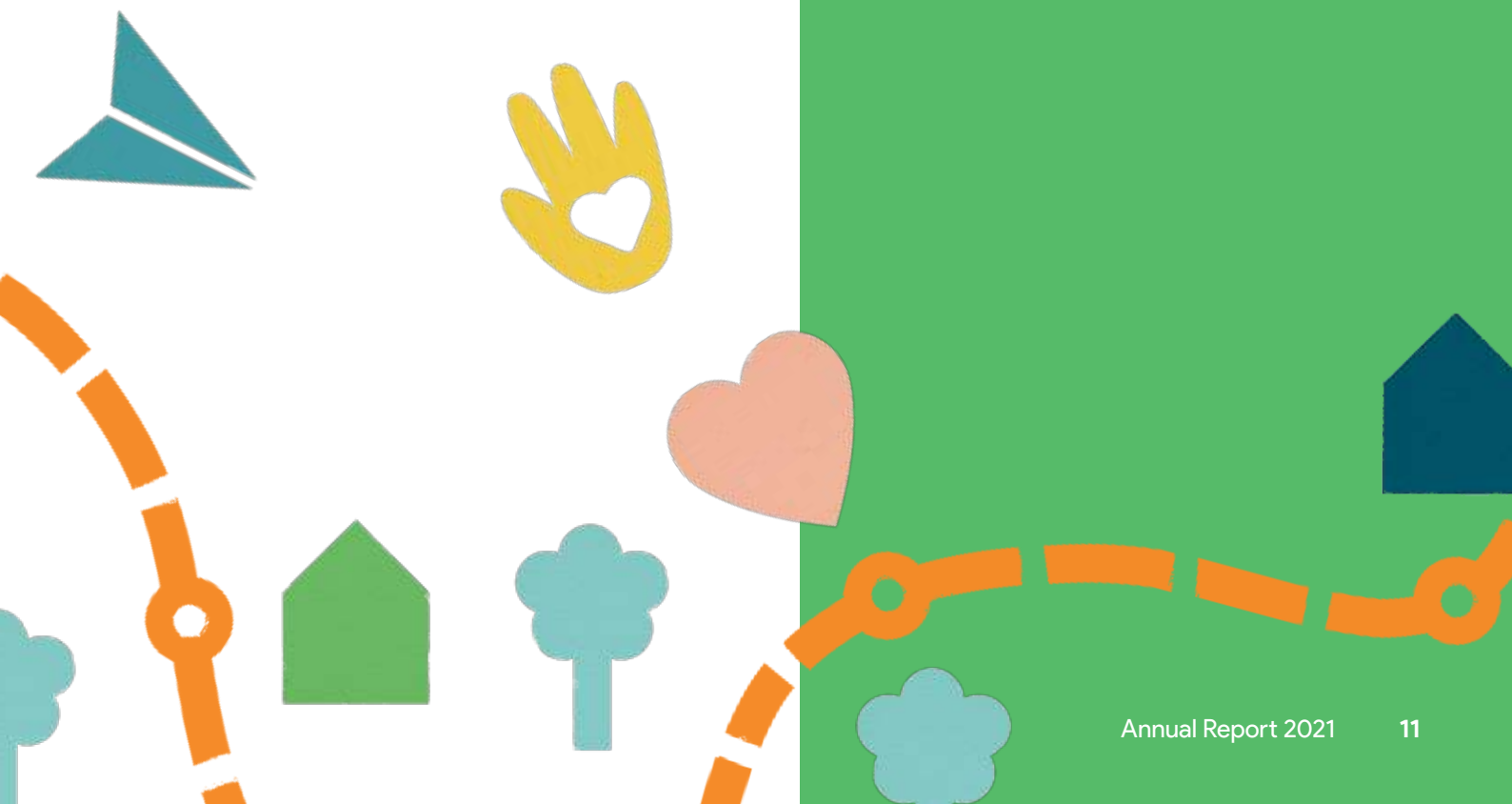
IFCA hosted a focus group in January 2021 and presented the details of the proposal to attendees. Feedback from the focus group was shared with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in a subsequent meeting IFCA attended with Department representatives.

Key Points:

Overall foster carers who provided feedback did not support the proposal. Concern was expressed that the supports currently available to foster carers would be eroded if the proposal was enacted. Foster carers acknowledged the value of the relationship they had with the link social worker and having a separate space to reflect on and consider specific issues that may be arising for them in their role. Concerns were expressed regarding how allegations of abuse by the child against the foster carer would be responded to if there was only one allocated social worker. Although there were provisions identified for the arrangement to be reversed in certain situations if requested by the foster carer, and the reappointment of a link worker and child in care social worker, foster carers questioned the oversight of this and the time it could take to have the arrangement reversed. Foster carers noted that they could lose the original link worker they had and this was a concern to them.

Outcome/ Next Steps:

The Department agreed to pause the proposal and to potentially revisit again at a later date.



National Gatherings for Foster Carers

How this impacts on foster carers:

The purpose of IFCA's national gatherings is to gather foster carer views and experiences in their care roles and with this knowledge, influence policy and practice in foster care.

IFCA's Role:

IFCA conducted focus groups with foster carers during the summer months of 2021, to hear their views on what is working and what is not working for them and children in foster care. A report detailing the outcome of the gatherings was made available to members.

Key Points:

Amongst the positive experiences foster carers referred to was the impact they and their families have on the lives of children in care, being involved in care planning for the child in their care and the value of peer support in supporting them to share their experiences. The experience of fostering during Covid-19 was positive for many, as foster carers found they had increased autonomy over day to day decisions in relation to the child's care. Foster carers expressed a greater sense of belonging within the child's life during this period. The role of IFCA in supporting foster carers was valued, as well as the services offered. The National Advocacy Service and newly launched Counselling Service were welcomed and used. IFCA workshops and trainings, provided great opportunities for learning and support.

Some of the challenges experienced by foster carers included navigating the legal system, building relationships with social workers, and caring for children with complex needs in an environment where there is limited access to supports and often a lack of stability in social work staff due to high staff turnover. Foster carers described a lack of trust in the system and with Tusla staff, the inconsistencies in terms of service responses to children's needs, of being excluded from decision making in relation to how the needs of children they care for are met, and the challenges of moving from fostering to adoption. Foster carers noted the lack of acknowledgement of the impact of an allegation on both foster carers and their family. Foster carers identified the need for the process of enhanced rights to be reviewed especially in the case of children in voluntary long-term care and the need for the language and process around aftercare to be reviewed.

Outcome/Next Steps:

A report was prepared from the Gatherings and shared with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Tusla, members and key stakeholders.



HIQA Draft National Standards for Children's Social Services

How this impacts on foster carers:

HIQA proposed a new set of draft National Standards for Children's Social Services used to inform, guide and measure the delivery of foster care to children, and underpinned by four principles - a human rights-based approach, safety and wellbeing, responsiveness, and accountability, all working together to achieve child-centred services. Once approved the draft National Standards for Children's Social Services would replace the National Standards for Foster Care (2003).

IFCA's Role:

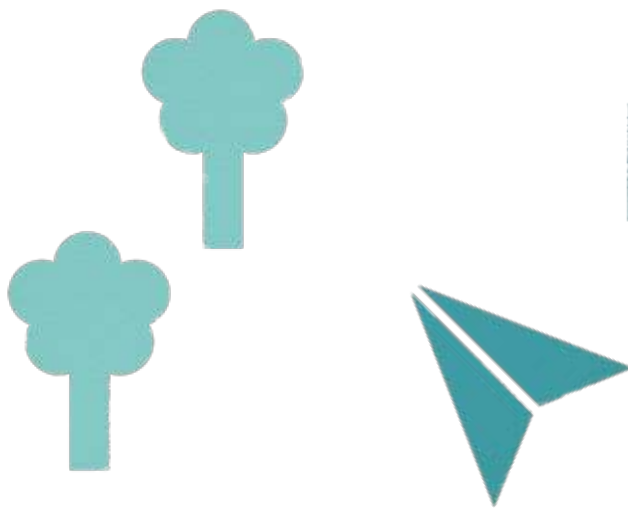
IFCA convened a focus group meeting between HIQA and our members to allow them to hear of the genuine concerns of foster carers. A series of meetings were also held with HIQA. IFCA engaged in HIQA's online consultation process and provided a written submission to HIQA. With members support, IFCA also lobbied TD's and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. IFCA's Chairperson, a board member (and foster carer), and the CEO, met with the Minister and detailed the concerns of IFCA and its members. The Minister assured IFCA that he has requested HIQA review the current draft.

Key Points:

The draft standards aim to improve the quality of care and support children at risk and children in care receive and spells out how a child should experience a service that is meeting the standard. Foster carers welcomed the focus on the voice of the child, which is clearly articulated in the draft standards. However, foster carers expressed concern that the draft standards provided overarching principles and as such are not measurable. Foster carers felt the draft standards did not adequately reflect their role and the complexities inherent in fostering. There is no mention of the support needs of foster carers within the draft National standards. Foster carers queried the effectiveness of standards that run across all services for children in care and child protection, believing that there is the potential for the unique and complex needs of children in care to be overlooked.

Outcome/Next Steps:

The draft National Standards for Children Services were not approved by the Minister for Children and HIQA were advised by the Minister to review the current draft. IFCA continues to engage with HIQA on the review of the draft Standards.



Services Overview

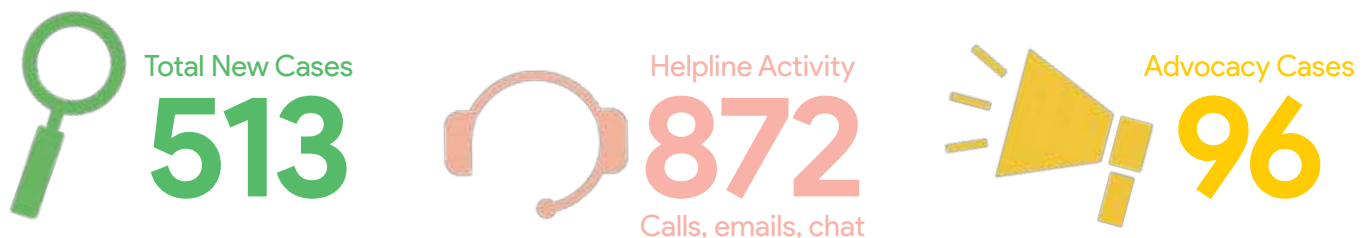


National Helpline Service

In 2021 the National Helpline Service remained busy with calls, emails, and webchat queries, especially in relation to the challenges of Covid-19. Calls remained the main route of contact for the Helpline, but in 2021, with the introduction of a web-chat function on IFCA's new website, a rise in contact via this new facility was noted. This new function facilitates those with a query about fostering to contact IFCA outside of the helpline hours, and are responded to on the following working day. Advocacy referrals continued to be made for foster carers needing additional support.

Helpline staff and volunteers continued to work remotely throughout the year, supporting callers. We are grateful to our volunteers and the wonderful work they do, and for all their work and contribution in 2021, in what was a challenging year.

Helpline Statistics



Contact Route:



Top 3 Counties:

Dublin
Cork
Galway

Top 3 Primary Issues:

- Allegation queries
- General foster care queries
- Assessment/approval of foster carers – issues/delays

Top 3 Secondary Issues:

- Lack of communication/support from social work teams
- Tusla policies and procedures
- Family support (for new carers being assessed or in kinship care/private arrangements)

Helpline Themes:

Pension for Foster Carers:

In 2021 calls were received in relation to pensions for foster carers. Many calls related to the Homemakers Scheme and foster carers being unable to access pension rights as a result of not having previous social welfare contributions.

Assessment/Approval:

Cases also included requests from relative foster carers who were involved in assessments to become relative foster carers. Other calls in this respect emanated from prospective foster carers seeking support around their foster care assessments.

Enhanced Rights:

Calls came into the Helpline in relation to Enhanced Rights whereby foster carers were seeking information on the policy and support in making an application for Enhanced Rights.

Access:

Foster carers contacted the helpline in relation to inconsistent practices regarding access during Covid-19 and also a lack of inclusion of foster carers in relation to access plans.

Communications with Social Workers:

An underlying theme emanating from calls to the National Helpline, was focussed on communication with social workers. Foster carers felt they were not being included in decisions in respect of the child/young person in their care. There was also concerns over the lack of support which in turn was affecting trust and relationships.

Foster carers reported that due to high turnover of social work staff, there was a lack of support or intervention which led to many foster care placements moving rapidly to crisis situations, which carers said they believed, with earlier support, could have been prevented.

Vaccinations:

Significant concerns were expressed by foster carers in respect of vaccinations for children. IFCA sought guidance from Tusla for foster carers and this was provided.

Tusla Policies and Procedures:

The lack of consistency in the application of Tusla policies and procedures nationally continues to generate calls to the helpline. Areas identified include, Access, Child Abuse Substantiation Procedure (CASP), Vaccination Guidance, Enhanced Rights, Finance Policy and Foster Carer Review Policy. IFCA continues to liaise with Tusla in respect of these issues.

National Advocacy Service

So much of what we do in the National Advocacy Service depends on the **interpersonal, the making of connections, the building of trust**. The necessity to keep each other safe by socially distancing continued to contradict and challenge our understanding of what it means to be part of a community, to build relationships and offer support, but together we prevailed.

For the majority of 2021 our advocates continued to engage and establish connections with our members through phone calls, video calls, and teleconference. To further complicate matters, the HSE suffered a major cyberattack which caused its IT systems nationwide to be shut down. This was a challenging time for the Advocacy Service, we continued to provide support to our members to reduce concerns and manage people's expectations to **lessen the distress and worry** associated with any ongoing delays and communication difficulties. This was particularly difficult for those service users who had experienced or were undergoing a Section 3 assessment of an allegation of abuse.

Covid-19 and the cyber crisis did not result in less demand for our services, with Advocacy receiving a further **96 new referrals**. We delivered an advocacy service in response to all referrals to the service. Through prioritisation and risk assessment we ensured that, where critical issues arose, the advocate met with the person or attended a meeting when necessary. In August 2021 the advocacy service gradually and cautiously returned to in-person meetings, adjusting, and adapting the way we did our work in line with the frequently changing health advice.

The referrals primarily related to the following areas:

- allegations of abuse and serious concerns
- placement breakdowns
- managing young people's behaviour

- communication issues with social work teams

These issues were often intertwined and overlapping. But without doubt, in one form or another it was a feeling of grief and loss that was central to the concerns and issues we supported. Often times this was hidden and expressed as anger and frustration. A small number of foster carers were particularly challenged when attempting to keep children in their care or were seeking to continue connections with the children, after they left their care. These foster carers required intensive support from our service to begin the process of adjusting to the reality of their relationship status to the child. Quite often our work requires us to fill in the gaps in foster carers understanding of the childcare system, and to assist in managing their expectations of what they may be able to achieve, this was particularly the case when a voluntary care order was still in place on a long-term basis. Within these cases we also supported foster carers to explore how the placement was impacting on marital harmony, their birth children, and their wider family connections. The complexities and challenges within these cases demonstrate the essential need for IFCA's advocacy work.

Our objective and ambition for 2021 was to deepen and embed the principles underpinning our service, emphasising **humanistic values, dignity, mutual respect, trust, and equality**, and this applies to everyone we encounter through our service. The following case scenario is an example of our work with Amy and Troy (not their real names).



Amy, Troy and their two foster children

Relatively new to foster care Amy and Troy were enthusiastic and passionate about opening their home to vulnerable children. Amy said the couple did attend a short training seminar on how to care for children with disabilities, but it wasn't enough to prepare them for the reality of what was to come. Committed to the children who came to live with them, the following year was intense, with a little boy with signs of ADHD and his younger sister who might have a sensory or learning difference. Neither child had received formal diagnoses, and there was very little known about them prior to their entry to care.

Initially, Amy and Troy felt that they were the only ones **advocating for their foster children**, they felt alone and unheard. They needed someone to accept their observations, offer support and help them understand the children's behaviour and services available to them. They felt that perhaps they were failing the children and seriously considering ending the placement. Social workers feared they were not coping. Frustrated at the length of time it was taking to see change they contacted IFCA's Helpline and were referred to the Advocacy service.

Amy and Troy were supported by their IFCA advocacy worker to **share their experience, to name how they were feeling, and express what they felt needed** to happen to resolve some of these issues. Practical suggestions including taking a written account of their observations, to link these events and circumstances, clearly identifying their worries and concerns for the children. And, crucially to note when things were working well. They were encouraged to request a meeting to share and explore their experience with the social work team. Our approach is to always seek to restore and repair relationships whenever possible, always aware of the complex statutory task of providing for children in care.

Amy and Troy were also encouraged to consider their own well-being and take opportunities to **incorporate self-care and compassion**.

With advocacy support they were able to share their concerns, and social workers shared some of their concerns. Differences in views and perspectives were shared but a plan was agreed. It was acknowledged that the children's needs were more complex than first understood. Amy and Troy reported that if advocacy had not assisted them to **prepare and participate** in the meeting with confidence, they may not have felt heard. With additional support these foster carers are continuing to foster, but with a sense of inclusion, and a clearer understanding and expectation of everyone's role. Most importantly, the children are more settled and beginning to receive additional supports.

Counselling Service

IFCA was delighted to launch a dedicated Counselling Service to foster carers in May 2021 with funding from Pobal. Recognising how daunting seeking this type of support can be we set out to provide a **holistic, safe, supportive, and confidential environment**. We had capacity to offer **15 foster carers six free counselling sessions**. Foster carers could seek support for emotional or psychological difficulties, often related to the experience of an allegation of abuse or placement breakdown. The pathway to referral was generally following a foster carer sharing their feelings of fear, anxiety and unhelpful thoughts or responses with their advocacy worker. Advocacy workers noted this and suggested that it might be time to explore these feelings with care and purpose with our counsellor. A key component of the Counselling Service is a focus on self-care, compassion, and wellness techniques. The introduction of the Counselling Service has complimented the aims and objectives of IFCA to support foster care families, which is to deliver on the principle of **having your voice heard and feeling supported when doing so**.

The Counselling Service is open to individual foster carer members and foster carer couples who encounter challenging situations in their foster caring roles. Referrals to the service are made from the National Advocacy Service with the consent of the foster carer.

The National Counselling Service provides IFCA's fostering families with a compassionate, non-judgemental and confidential environment where they can explore their thoughts and feelings about challenging situations that the fostering experience has placed upon them. This approach is located within a Humanistic and Integrative approach with foster carers that respects, values and treats the individual as a whole person, physically, spiritually, mentally and emotionally. IFCA's counsellor works with foster carers who may have encountered allegations of abuse, complaints made against them, carers who have been involved in complex fostering experiences or have found that the fostering experience has placed stress and anxiety upon them and their relationships have suffered as a result. Drawing from a trauma-informed approach our counsellor's focus is to explore and understand how foster carers' experiences have brought them to this point in their lives. IFCA's counsellor collaborates with IFCA's foster carers to develop their capacity to become more resourceful, empowered, and resilient to resolve conflicts and move towards personal healing.

Learning and Development

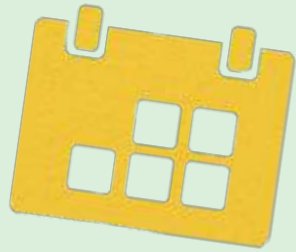
2021 was a busy and stimulating year for Learning and Development in IFCA. Driven by the encouraging response of our members to the online learning events we offered in 2020 due to Covid-19, we worked to expand the range of learning events we could make available to support foster carers and fostering practitioners in their roles. Guided by the needs identified by IFCA members and other key stakeholders in fostering, a broad range of new training was created. We are lucky to have such an experienced panel of trainers. Thank you to everyone who participated in our community of learning and practice during 2021.

IFCA National Learning Events:

IFCA's national training schedule ran in two parts in 2021. The spring-summer diary had learning events running from April to July. The autumn-winter schedule ran from September 2021 to November and from January 2022 to the end of February 2022.

- IFCA provided 67 learning events in 2021.
- 1,037 foster carers and practitioners attended an IFCA co-ordinated learning event in 2021.
- Learning events were organised both locally in collaboration with IFCA branches and nationally for foster carers all around the country.
- Learning events were also organised in collaboration with Tusla Fostering Departments in Kerry, Donegal, South Tipperary, Carlow, Kilkenny, Laois, Offaly, Westmeath, Longford, Dublin South West, West Wicklow and Kildare for foster carers in those counties.
- 19 new learning events were added to the IFCA learning curriculum.
- There was increased focus on joint learning events for foster carers and fostering practitioners that enable them to learn together to develop shared understanding and common language.
- Learning events which took place as part of Fostering Fortnight in March 2021 focused on emotional wellbeing of children and their foster carers which led to some new additions to the IFCA learning curriculum. Events included sessions on understanding and responding to anxiety in children, and self-care for foster carers, along with story telling as a way to help children in care make sense of their experiences and their lives. Fostering Fortnight also hosted two short talks on therapeutic fostering by Dr. Jane Herd - All in This Together and No Such Thing as Bad Behaviour.

IFCA Learning Events January to December 2021



A Deeper Look at Trauma for foster carers in Co. Kerry in collaboration with Tusla Kerry and as a national training.

Just Right State: A Sensory Attachment Course for foster carers - national training.

Supporting Traumatised Teenagers for foster carers in Co. Kerry in collaboration with Tusla Kerry.

Supporting Children with Emotional, Behavioural and Mental Health Problems with foster carers in Co. Kerry in collaboration with Tusla Kerry, and as a national training.

Supporting Children who have Experienced Bereavement and Loss for foster carers in Co. Kerry in collaboration with Tusla Kerry, and as a national training.

No Such Thing as Bad Behaviour as part of Fostering Fortnight and as a national training later in the year.

Self-Care Through Self-Compassion, a two-part training as part of Fostering Fortnight, and with foster carers in Co. Kerry and Co. Donegal in collaboration with Tusla.

All in This Together as part of Fostering Fortnight.



Storytelling: How Stories Speak to Children as part of Fostering Fortnight.

Caring for Traumatised Babies and Toddlers for foster carers in Co. Kerry and South Tipperary, Carlow and Kilkenny in collaboration with Tusla in those areas.

Being Foster Carer Review Ready a two-part training with foster carers in South Tipperary/Carlow/Kilkenny in collaboration with Tusla in that area, and as a national training.

Understanding and Responding to Anxiety in Children national training on two occasions, and also with foster carers in Co. Donegal in collaboration with Tusla Donegal and with foster carers and practitioners in South Tipperary, Carlow and Kilkenny in collaboration with Tusla in that area.



Putting Life's Jigsaw Together: Lifestory Work with Children a 3-part national training with foster carers in Co. Kerry, South Tipperary/Carlow/Kilkenny, Dublin South/ West Wicklow/ Kildare, Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath in collaboration with Tusla in these areas.

Dealing with Allegations and Complaints for foster carers in Co. Cork in collaboration with IFCA Cork Branch, and as a national training.

A Compassionate Approach to Experiencing Loss Within Fostering: 8-Week Programme of Support and Self-Care - national training.

Help Me Reach My Teenager: Building Connections with Teenagers who Present as Angry, Aggressive or Coercive - national training and with foster carers in South Tipperary/Carlow/Kilkenny in collaboration with Tusla in that area, and IFCA Wexford Branch.

Resolving Issues in Foster Care national training.

Helping Children to Recover from Trauma through Therapeutic Play national training.

Parenting the Hurt Child Open Forum - national training.

Supporting Sibling Relationships - national training.

Self-Care Through Self-Compassion (8-week course) national training.

Introduction to Mindfulness Course - for members.

Behaviour as Communication: Supporting Traumatised Children and Adolescents to Regulate their own Emotions and Behaviour - national training and also with IFCA Wexford Branch.

Social Skills Development in Traumatised Children - national training.

Eating Problems and Trauma national training.

Trauma and the Science of Sleep: Supporting Replenishing Sleep in Traumatised Children national training.

Responding to Lying and Stealing national training.

Psychological Dissociation in Traumatised Children - national training.

Supporting the Development of Mentalisation in Children and Adolescents - national training.

Suicide & Self-Harm: Understanding and Helping Children and Adolescents who Experience Suicide Ideation and who Use Self-Harm to Cope with Difficult Experiences and Feelings national training.

Supporting the Development of Self-Esteem and Resilience in Traumatised Children - national training.

Trauma Training for Fostering Practitioners: An 8-week training programme for Tusla Kerry Fostering Social Work Team.

Rupture and Repair: Responding to Disruption and Loss in Fostering: an 8-week programme of learning, support and reflective practice process, in collaboration with Tusla Midlands and Tusla South Tipperary/Carlow/Kilkenny.



'A Compassionate Space' with Marianne Dwyer on a monthly basis from August 2021 to year end.

Tired of Timeouts: An Attachment Mindset to Parenting national training.

Raising Children with Confidence, Competence and Resilience - national training.

Supporting Access with Birth Families - national training and also with foster carers and practitioners in Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath and South Tipperary/ Carlow/Kilkenny in collaboration with Tusla in these areas.

Self-care and Learning and Support around Loss

During 2021 we expanded our focus on self-care for foster carers and we were pleased to add an 8-week programme of learning and support for foster carers who have experienced loss within fostering. **‘A Compassionate Approach to Experiencing Loss within Fostering’** focussed on supporting loss through a placement breakdown or a child returning to the care of the birth family, the death of a child, a young person moving on to aftercare and independent living or the difficult experience of a complaint or allegation of abuse against them.

For foster carers who had completed a Self-Care through Self-Compassion course or a Compassionate Approach to Experiencing Loss within Fostering, a monthly support space was set up facilitated by Marianne Dwyer **‘Caring for the Carers: A Compassionate Space’** a two-hour online ‘support space’ which ran on a monthly basis from August to December 2021. The aim of these sessions was to help foster carers to integrate self-care into their lives on an ongoing basis.

Introduction to Mindfulness

In March and April 2021, IFCA staff member and mindfulness facilitator offered a series of four fortnightly sessions in a course called ‘Introduction to Mindfulness’. In the sessions, foster carers had a space to practice mindfulness, to explore how mindfulness could be helpful to them in their foster carer role, and to exchange with others about their experiences. A total of nine foster carers took part in the series and gave positive feedback about the practical application of mindfulness to their lives. This course was of great support to foster carers during Covid-19.

Rupture and Repair: Responding to Disruption and Loss in Fostering

Rupture and Repair: Responding to Disruption and Loss in Fostering was a new pilot programme of joint training with foster carers and practitioners funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and involved the development of an 8-week programme of learning, support and reflective practice. This was developed in collaboration with staff in the Fostering Departments in Tusla Midlands and Tusla South Tipperary/Carlow/Kilkenny and practitioner trainers who were contracted to assist in the development and delivery of the programme – Della Murtagh, Occupational Therapist, Bridget McDonagh, Social Worker and Roisin Stewart and Andrew Kennedy of St. Bernards Children’s Services in Co. Tipperary.

This new programme aims to support foster carers and fostering practitioners to respond to the factors which lead to various kinds of disruptions or ‘ruptures’ in fostering and the impacts of those ruptures on the relationships between the child, the foster carer and the practitioner. It is an opportunity for foster carers and fostering practitioners to learn together and from each other, each contributing to the learning from the perspective of their unique experience, skills and roles.

The programme worked with twenty seven foster carers and fostering practitioners from the two pilot areas of the Midlands and South Tipperary/Carlow/Kilkenny starting in November and running until February 2022. Outcomes of the programme are being evaluated to inform a future roll-out of the programme.

Journey Through Fostering: New Pre-approval Foster Carer Training

A working group comprised of IFCA staff, and IFCA's external trainers and authors completed the development of IFCA's new Pre-approval Foster Carer training, entitled Journey through Fostering. A summary of the new programme was shared with key stakeholders in Tusla in 2021. IFCA has been working with Tusla towards a piloting and delivery of the new programme which we hope will be completed in 2022.

The new programme is based on the CARE Model¹ and a Core Competency Framework for foster carers. These guide the development of other learning events and courses on the IFCA curriculum for the ongoing learning and development of foster carers and fostering practitioners.

Learning Curriculum Review

IFCA engaged Dr. Jane Herd in 2021, to carry out a review of IFCA's learning curriculum with a view to the development of a therapeutically informed framework, (TIFC), in consultation with IFCA's panel of trainers. The review is scheduled to be completed in 2022.

Branches & Hubs

In 2021, IFCA had 11 active Branches throughout the country with over 30 volunteers. The advent of Covid-19 struck at a time when our Hubs were still in development, hence delaying the full development of our Hubs in 2021. Despite this, in 2021 IFCA Branches and Hubs covered 26 counties.

Branches and Hubs continued to be heavily impacted as a result of public health restrictions, limiting their branch activities to online meetings until the latter part of 2021. Following public health advice issued in November 2021 there was a careful and gradual approach to recommencing face to face Branch activities. A few very carefully arranged Branch events took place e.g. trips to the Pantomine, Dublin Zoo Lights, Christmas dinners and coffee mornings with plans for others postponed until 2022.

IFCA is grateful to have such a dedicated team of volunteers and champions within our Branches and Hubs who throughout a challenging year were creative in ways to promote opportunities for foster carers to stay connected and be supported.

1 Colby Pierce 2018

National Conference - Minding Transitions in Foster Care

IFCA's National Conference took place online from 5th-6th November with the theme 'Minding Transitions In Foster Care'. Transition is a core experience for children and young people in care. While every person's life contains transitions, large and small, for children in care they can experience multiple transitions across a range of relationships.

The conference opened with a beautiful and powerful rendition of the song 'I'll be there', performed by the foster carers' choir. Voices of young care leavers who are members of EPIC's National Youth Council were heard in their production of the song 'Conveyor Belt'. The addition of music to the conference was very welcomed by those in attendance.

We were delighted to be joined by Justice Catherine McGuinness patron of IFCA at the conference launch. Catherine acknowledged the many changes or 'transitions' that have taken place within the care system in terms of policy and practice and the impact this has had on the experiences for children. Catherine noted the journey IFCA travelled since its establishment 40 years ago in 1981, and the supports it continues to provide to the fostering community. In his opening address, Roderic O'Gorman, TD, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth, acknowledged the value and importance of effective partnerships between government and stakeholders such as IFCA in improving outcomes for children in care.

The online format allowed us to invite international keynote speakers. Dr Dan Hughes and Dr Jon Baylin, from the US, both of whom are renowned in their respective fields of work. They spoke to the value of the 'holding relationship' which travels with the child across settings and other



Dr Dan Hughes



Dr Jon Baylin

relationships, recognising that for children in care and their network of caregivers, major transitions are more frequent and often less predictable. Their keynote speech **'Pacing the foster child through transitions: Creating a co-regulating, unconditionally caring relationship that travels with the child through changes of setting and development'** presented Dan Hughes's PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) model alongside concepts from neuroscience to equip caregivers and therapists with an understanding of what happens to children who are deeply mistrustful because of their formative experiences. They considered the caring adult to be a potential "messenger of safety" for the child. The importance and value of learning the history of the child before they came into care, was highlighted as a way of developing insight into any defensive or challenging behaviours that the child may exhibit.

The theme of transitions was carried through into eight workshops, covering topics such as relationships with birth parents, the needs of migrant children as they transition through cultures, supporting babies through transitions, the needs of autistic children in the education system, supporting professionals through transitions as part of social, and different ways of looking at what is happening in placement breakdowns. Presentations from the Ombudsman for Children's Office and from Dr Maria Lotty about trauma informed foster care completed the workshop programme. The workshops

were complemented by eight Around the Table discussions which covered the themes of self-care and self-compassion, aftercare, the journey from fostering to adoption, supporting LGBTQI+ children and young people, children's legal rights, the perspectives of birth children, supporting migrant children in care and a 'back to basics' look at the needs of children.

206 adults attended the online conference, along with 15 children and young people.

The children and young people's programmes provided opportunities for children and young people to engage in drama, a virtual scavenger hunt and a virtual magic show.

The conference closed with a panel discussion on the theme, **Minding transitions in foster care – ways forward**. Panel members included Nuala Ward, Ombudsman for Children's Office, Christina Enright, Psychotherapist, Kate Duggan, Director of Services & Integration, Tusla—Child and Family Agency and Catherine Bond, IFCA CEO.

The low participation of children and young people at on-line activities was noted, recognising the importance of interpersonal relationships and interactional events for them at IFCA's annual national conference, which we hope to see a return to in 2022.

Foster Journal Issue 11

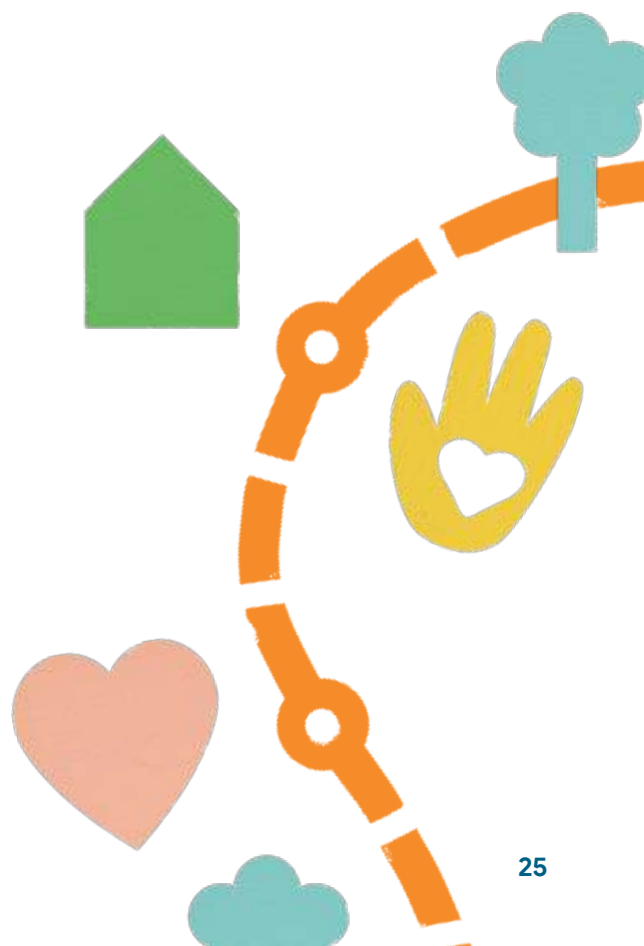
Foster Journal Issue 11 was drawn from conference presentations at the 2020 Annual National Conference, which took place online, and which was titled 'Families who Foster'. Keynote speaker Aoife Bairéad wrote about fostering teenagers from an attachment and trauma-informed perspective, Dr Jane Herd provided a map of Therapeutic Foster Care, Jim Cantwell looked at fostering through the lens of family systems, the I Believe group of birth children contributed their experiences of being members of fostering families, Liz Donohoe offered guidance on improving communication within families, and in this issue we also reprinted Professor Robbie

Gilligan's 2019, in-depth examination of the foster care system in Ireland.

Foster Journal Issue 12

The twelfth issue of Foster Journal, entitled Life stories – part two, continues where issue 10, Life stories, left off, with personal contributions by people whose lives have all been touched by foster care. This issue marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of IFCA in 1981 and presents first-hand experiences of foster care dating back to the 1970s in Ireland.

The stories in this issue come from a woman from the Travelling community who grew up in care, a family who became foster carers for the first time during Covid-19, a group of migrant siblings in care, a relative foster carer, a birth parent, and a retired social worker and former national management member of Tusla—Child and Family Agency. These powerful and inspiring stories reflect the complexity of the wider field of foster care and they urge us to hear and understand the many perspectives contained within it.



Fostering Fortnight

Fostering Fortnight took place from 1st – 14th March 2021 and was packed full of training and learning events, competitions and fun family bake alongs. Fostering Fortnight aims to shine a light on all the valuable contributions made in fostering families every day. It is a chance for all those involved in fostering, and the communities that support them to tell their stories and share their experiences. In 2021, Fostering Fortnight focussed on the mental health and well-being of foster families in Ireland. We put together a range of information sessions, talks and fun family activities, all online, for all those involved in foster care in Ireland, to offer foster carers support and connection.

Fostering Fortnight is an opportunity to celebrate foster care in Ireland and the benefits that growing up in a family environment can have on children in care. This can contribute greatly to better outcomes for children, offering them stability and permanence in a family setting at a time in their lives when they need it most.

Fostering Fortnight Activities:

- How Stories Speak to Children (and adults) with Bernadette Neville
- Therapeutic Fostering Talks, Dr. Jane Herd
- Understanding and Responding to Anxiety in Childhood with Peadar Maxwell
- Self-care Through Self Compassion with Marianne Dwyer
- Training for the Under 12's with Zak Moradi
- Bake Along with Erica Drumm

Therapeutic Stories for Children were narrated kindly by Kim Golding and Aimee Richardson and featured on social media. These are available on our website.



Stories from Foster Care

2021 saw the launch of our Stories from Foster Care podcast series. Hosted by Niamh Barrett, Stories from Foster Care meets people from all walks of life who all have different experiences of foster care in Ireland. Our guest on our inaugural episode was Anne McCluskey, a foster carer and retired school principal. We talked about Anne's journey as a foster carer, and her perspectives on supporting foster children through the education system. Anne is a passionate advocate for the rights of children in care and she has a wealth of experience and knowledge.

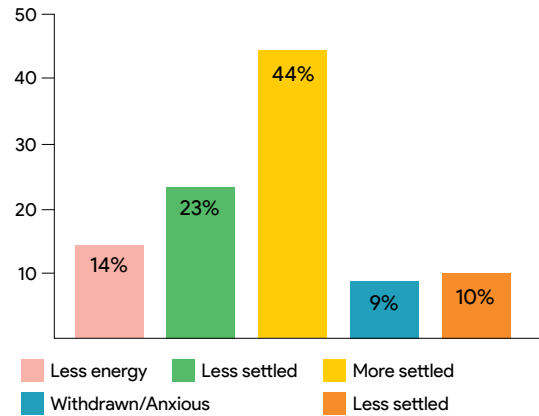
You can access Stories from Foster Care wherever you get your podcasts or visit www.ifca.ie

Members Survey

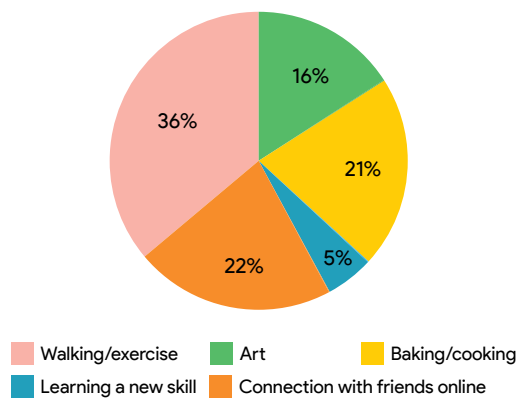
As part of Fostering Fortnight we asked members to take part in a 10 minute survey to tell us how they were managing their mental health and well-being and that of their foster children during the pandemic.

And this is what they told us:

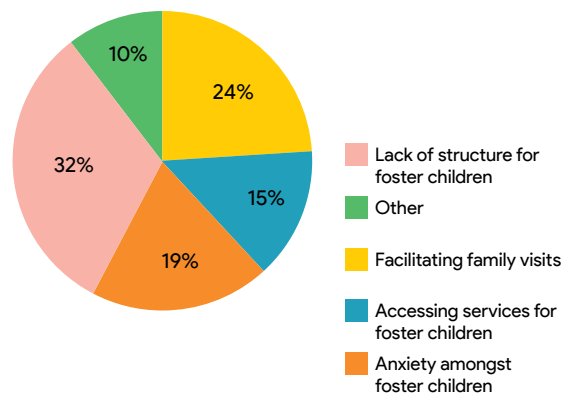
What changes have you seen in your foster child since the pandemic began?



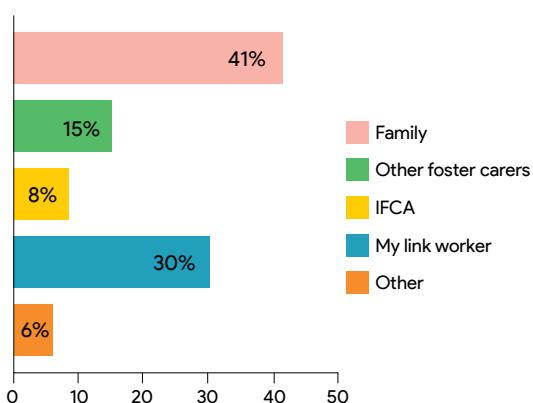
How have you supported your foster child's mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic?



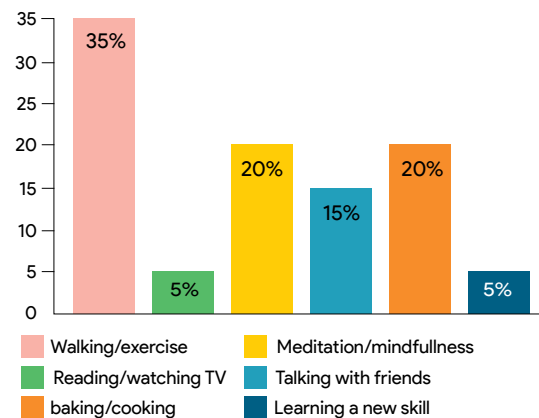
What are the unique challenges facing you as a foster carer during this pandemic?



Where have you looked for support during this pandemic in your role as a foster carer?



How have you minded your mental and physical well-being during this pandemic?



Financial Statements



Where Our Funding Comes From

Tusla

Tusla continues to provide the core funding to enable IFCA to provide its current range of supports to our members. We received specific funding to cover some of the challenges we experienced as a result of Covid-19, which enabled us to provide support to our members remotely. In recognition of our 40 year anniversary, Tusla provided funding to help support our national conference online. The Tusla funding amounted to 71% of our overall income in 2021.

Pobal

We received funding from Pobal through the SSNO (Scheme to Support National Organisations) grant which was provided to enable the development of our member support service. This grant funding will conclude in June 2022. The Pobal funding amounted to 10% of our overall income in 2021

Members Income

Another strand of IFCA's income is generated through its membership fees and legal insurance payments, with 11% of our overall income coming from our membership base.

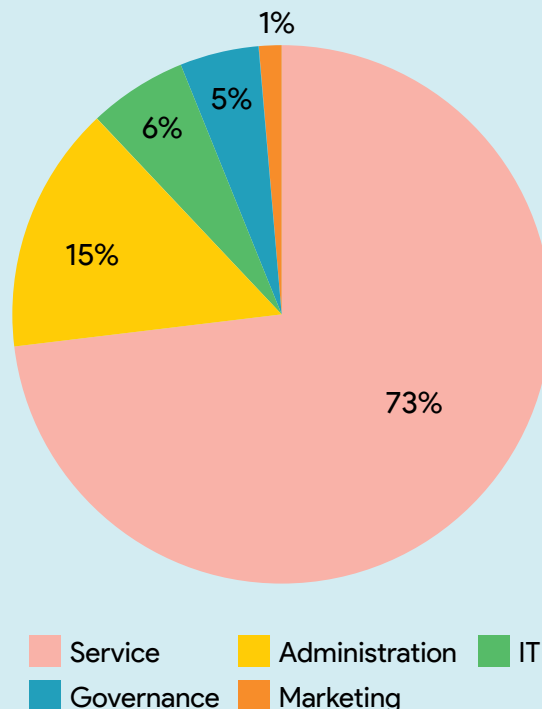
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

We were delighted to receive two, one off grants from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth which enabled us to develop our CRM system and payment portal. It also allowed us to develop the "What Works" training programme. The total grant amounted to 6% of our overall income in 2021.

Sponsorship, Donations & Other Income

A small but very valuable portion of our funding comes from donations and other income, and we were fortunate to receive funding from The Ireland Funds. These income streams amounted to 2% of our overall income in 2021.

How our Funding is used



Detailed income and expenditure account Financial year ended 31 December 2021

	2021 €	2020 €
Income		
Miscellaneous Income	154,423	152,278
Fundraising/Donations	8,148	11,914
Tusla Funding	549,547	567,244
Tusla Funding for hubs/branches	45,021	41,701
An Pobal	85,968	163,915
Total Income	843,107	937,052
Expenditure		
Overheads	89,582	90,841
Payroll & Pension costs	427,765	503,144
Telephone & Postage	19,567	20,798
Conference/Seminars/Meetings	24,893	12,300
Learning & Development	60,857	27,713
Equipment/IT/Website costs	50,080	36,993
General Expenses	121,748	150,993
Foster Family social events	6,876	8,089
Depreciation	3,551	38,685
	804,919	889,556
Surplus/Deficit for the financial year	38,188	47,496
Other interest receivable or similar income	20	15
Surplus/(Deficit)	38,208	47,511

Balance sheet as at 31 December 2021

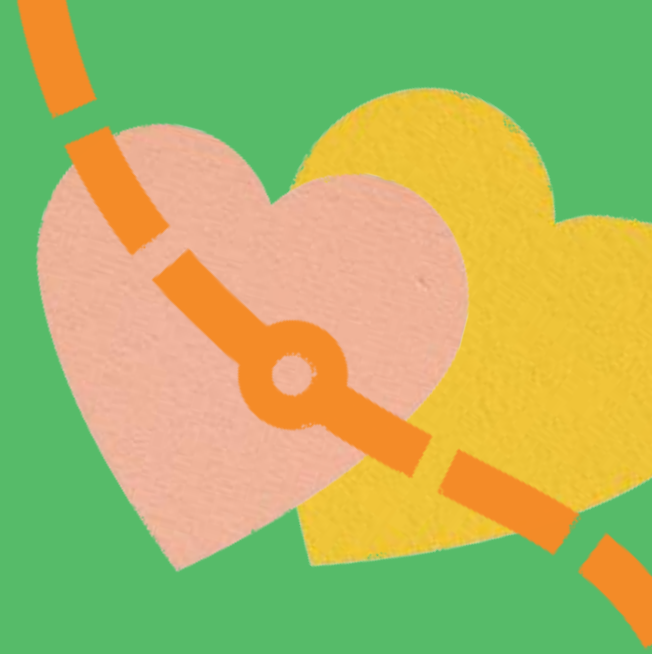
	2021 €	€	2020 €	€
Fixed Assets				
Tangible Assets	2,784		6,335	
		2,784		6,335
Current Assets				
Debtors	33,828		13,538	
Cash at bank and in hand:				
Branch/Hub	123,497		127,854	
Head Office	309,863		258,497	
	467,188		399,889	
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	(138,905)		(113,365)	
Net current assets		328,283		286,524
Total assets less current liabilities		331,067		292,859
Net assets		331,067		292,859
Capital and reserves				
Income and expenditure account		331,067		292,859
Members funds		331,067		292,859

These financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the provisions applicable to companies subject to the small companies' regime and in accordance with Section 1A of FRS102 'The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland'.

Board of Directors 2021 - Attendance at Board Meetings

Directors	Title	Attended 2021
Raymond Nolan	Chairperson	7 out of 7
Sandra Duffy	Vice Chairperson	7 out of 7
Neil Whoriskey	Company Secretary	7 out of 7
Ailish O'Donnell	Treasurer	6 out of 7
Riccardo Panza	Trustee	5 out of 7
Rita Martin	Trustee	3 out of 7
Paula Farrell	Trustee	6 out of 7
Mary Hickey	Trustee	6 out of 7
Harold Barber*	Trustee	3 out of 7
Dr. Helen Gogarty*	Trustee	2 out of 7
Joe Cullen*	Trustee	3 out of 7
Aaron Vickery*	Trustee	2 out of 7

* elected in September 2021



Thank You

Thank you to all our staff, volunteers, funders, supporters and partners that supported us during 2021. It is this support that allows the Irish Foster Care Association offer much needed services and connections to the fostering community in Ireland.

IFCA kindly acknowledges the funding we receive from our partners to support our services.



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth





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