



IRISH FOSTERCARE
ASSOCIATION SUBMISSION
TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS
COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN,
EQUALITY, DISABILITY,
INTEGRATION AND YOUTH

September 20th 2022

IRISH FOSTER CARE ASSOCIATION

1.0 Introduction

Chairperson, committee members, on behalf of the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA), I would like to thank you for the invitation to address the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth this afternoon, on issues relating to Foster Care.

I am accompanied by the Chairperson of IFCA, and foster carer, Mr. Raymond Nolan, Dr. Helen Gogarty, expert in children's attachment, and Mr. Brendan Gillen, IFCA Director, who joins the Committee, on-line.

The Irish Foster Care Association is the national organisation that supports foster care families and the wider fostering community.

IFCA is a membership organisation comprised of foster families, social workers, social care workers, academics and those with an interest in foster care.

IFCA advocates for excellence in foster care and services include.

1. National Helpline, Advocacy and Counselling services.
2. Learning and Development, including publications on research and best practice in foster care.
3. Support to foster carers involved in local branches, and Hubs.
4. An Annual National Conference which brings together, the wider fostering community, including children in care and the children of foster families.

The organisation has charitable status, is not-for-profit and is governed by a Board of Directors. It is registered with the Charities Regulatory Authority.

I have included supplementary information on IFCA in an Appendix 2, with this opening statement.

2.0 IMPORTANCE OF FOSTER CARE IN IRELAND

Foster Care is the backbone of care for children who are in the care of the State in Ireland.

Ireland is unique in that the majority of children who are in the care of the State live with foster care families, where they experience family life, which is testament to the value and importance of the family in our society and this is reflected in our legislation.

However, foster care is at a critical juncture in Ireland with extreme challenges to the system at present.

The predominant challenges are:

1. The complex issues for children who are received into care, and the lack of services to respond to their needs.
2. The challenges for foster care families in supporting children's needs.
3. The absence of investment in supporting foster care.

2.1 The needs of Children who are in the care of the State

A child comes into the care of the State when it is assessed that they are at risk, and require care and, or protection. Children are received into care in either a voluntary or court ordered capacity. Foster care is the predominant type of care for children in the Irish State, where foster families offer warm, caring family life to children, tending to their physical, social, emotional and other needs which are underpinned by the stability of family life. Foster care families support

children who may be dealing with issues of neglect, abuse, or abandonment and help them to feel supported, loved and accepted unconditionally.

Whilst the number of children being received into care has fallen, from 6044 in 2018¹, to 5,836 at the end of June 2022², so too has the percentage of children placed in foster care, falling from 92% in 2018, to 90% to June 2022³ This decrease relates to higher numbers of children being placed in non-foster care placements, and a trend that will be required to watch.

By the time a decision is made to place a child in care, they have already experienced many adverse early life events. These may include exposure to alcohol abuse in-utero, which can result in children having Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, substance abuse in-utero, insecure or disorganised attachments and trauma.

Research shows that children in care present with attachment profiles and are significantly more insecure than that of children in the general population who are not in care. In a 2002 study, only 6% of children in care were classified as having secure attachments, compared with non-clinical samples of 57% -80% in the general population.

It is also evidenced that in sequential attachment formation, when the first attachment is highly insecure and accompanied by trauma, subsequent attachments are more difficult to establish⁴. This presents great challenges in responding to the needs of children in foster care.

For many children these adversities remain undiagnosed. However, as children settle into the security of the foster care family, emergent expressed unmet

¹ Tusla Quarterly Performance and Activity (2018)

² Tusla Quarterly Performance Activity, (2022)

³ Tusla Quarterly Performance Activity, (2022)

⁴ Dr. Helen Gogarty

needs are presented, whereby, foster care families, are required to support the child through ranges of emotions and behaviours. To support these needs, foster care families require supports and responsive services for children.

Prior to the establishment of Tusla, foster care services were located within the HSE, and had access to other professional services. These included speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and other relevant professionals to meet the needs of children. Children in the care of the State were also prioritised for such services in the HSE as stipulated in the National Standards for Foster Care, (2003).⁵

With the establishment of Tusla, and the transferring of foster care services to that Agency, this is no longer the case. The outcome of this decision is that children in care who have experienced early life trauma, do not have access to, nor priority for required services.

2.2 The challenges for foster care families in supporting children's needs

Foster carers are assessed by social workers and approved to foster by Tusla's Fostering Committees⁶. When a foster care family begins fostering, they are allocated a link social worker, and the child is allocated a child in care social worker. This is a requirement of the National Standards for Foster Care, (2003). The challenges in recruiting and retaining social workers has been identified by Tusla, who in its 2021 Annual Report states that,

"There is a risk to operational service delivery in terms of social work resources available".⁷

⁵ National Standards for Foster Care, (2003).

⁶ Tusla Guidelines and Procedures for Foster Care Committees (2017).

⁷ Tusla Annual Report, (2021).

Tusla also identified in its annual report, the risk,

“to the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children in foster care, due to inadequate capacity/resources/systems to ensure compliance with national standards for safeguarding”.

This is a perfect storm.

Placing children with high levels of need with foster carers and without adequate resources or supports, places foster care families under severe pressure. This can result in placement endings, whereby, insufficient services and absence of social work resources places unrealistic demands and pressures on foster care families.

IFCA is the only independent organisation in Ireland that supports foster carers. During 2021, IFCA supported 30 foster care families where children’s placements were in crisis and at risk of ending, resulting in a move for the child to another foster care placement if one is available.

To date in 2022, IFCA has supported 23 potential and actual placement endings for children in foster care. Contributory factors to placement endings are the lack of services for children and lack of timely supports for foster carers.

Another stressor for foster care parents is the risk of allegations of abuse being made against them.

To date in 2022, 29 families have been supported by IFCA’s advocacy service, where an allegation of abuse has been made against them.

The challenge faced by foster parents are great, however, without support, placements flounder and can fail. It is reported that the outcomes for children in care are poor with the higher number of placements for a child.

Foster Carers have expressed that they do not feel valued or recognised by the State for their contribution to the State's alternative care system. This manifests in the lack of supports offered to them, and these include; on the ground support as provided by IFCA, financial supports and pension rights recognition by the State.

There is currently a shortage of foster care families to meet the demand of children coming into the care of the State, as advertised by Tusla in its most recent recruitment campaign.

Foster care is the lynchpin of the State's alternative care system. Without foster carers, more children will be placed in residential care, which, as evidenced, does not offer as favourable outcomes for children.

2.3 The need for greater investment in foster care

There is an urgent need for investment in foster care services which are:

- The provision of psychological assessment for each child entering care
- The provision of appropriate assessments for existing children in care
- The provision of timely services as recommended by children's assessments
- The recruitment of more social workers
- The recruitment of more foster care families
- The review of social work administrative tasks, to provide for more, "relational" time, with foster carers and children in care, which is the essence of social work practice
- The delegation of some foster care tasks to IFCA to reduce workloads on social workers, such as the training of all new foster carers, the provision of foster care support groups locally, the addition of advocacy support

services as an early intervention for complex foster care placements to prevent placement breakdowns.

- The extension of IFCA's national advocacy and counselling services to support foster care families who have been subject to allegations of abuse or serious welfare concerns, and placement breakdowns.
- The financial and pension recognition of foster parents

3.0 Recommendations

- Greater investment in foster care, as illustrated in 2.3
- Strengthen the contract to foster between Tusla and foster carers to give due recognition to the role they play on behalf of the State in the provision of the Alternative Care System
- The establishment of a permanent advisory panel on alternative care, comprised of those with in-depth knowledge of the subject, by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth. This permanent advisory group's remit should review current provision of foster care services, and make recommendations for enhancement, and future developments. The advisory group should act as a resource to Tusla in the development and maintaining of alternative care services in Ireland.
- Retain the National Standards for Foster Care, (2003).
- Adequately fund IFCA as the only independent national organisation that supports foster care in Ireland, to meet the support needs of foster care families and to aid recruitment and retention.

- Provide manageable caseloads and higher levels of support for social workers to improve recruitment and retention.
- Introduce a part-time social work degree to facilitate those currently in employment who wish to train as social workers.

4.0 Conclusion

Foster care is the backbone of the care of children in the State and requires a robust infrastructure to support it. As it stands today, foster care is at a precarious juncture.

Children coming into the care system must be prioritised and receive all necessary assessments and supports. Foster carers must also receive the supports required to enable them to care for children with very complex needs on behalf of the State. Supports must be timely, and available and foster carers should not have to lobby for services which are a right for children.

Investment is required in the foster care system, and in IFCA to provide supports to foster carers in their role.

THANK YOU, CHAIRPERSON AND MEMBERS,

Catherine Bond

IFCA CEO

Appendix 1 The National Standards for Foster Care – Social Worker Roles and Responsibilities

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

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

- explaining the complaints procedure to the children, providing a written copy of that procedure and assisting the children, where necessary, to complain about any aspect of their care.

The Link Social Workers is required to:

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

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

Appendix 2 – IFCA 2020 Annual Report

Please click on the link below to access IFCA's Annual Report:

https://ifca.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/15578_IFCA_Annual_Report_Web.pdf