



IRISH FOSTER CARE ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROTECTION, COMMUNITY, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AND THE ISLANDS

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Chairperson, members, on behalf of the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA), I would like to thank you for the invitation to address the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community, Rural Development and the Islands, this morning, on the issue of pensions for foster carers. I would also welcome the opportunity to briefly discuss the Foster Care Allowance.

I am accompanied by the Chairperson of IFCA, Mr Raymond Nolan and foster carer, Mr Brendan Gillen, Vice Treasurer to IFCA's Board Finance Subgroup and Ms Clare Corridon, who is also a newly approved foster carer.

Founded in 1981, the Irish Foster Care Association is the national organisation that supports foster families and the wider fostering community. We advance and promote best practice in foster care through:

- ✓ Support
- ✓ Advocacy
- ✓ learning provision, based on evidence-based research and best practice, and,
- ✓ Counselling

IFCA is a member organisation and members comprise mostly of foster carers, social workers, academics, and all those who have an interest in foster care.

IFCA has charitable status, is not-for-profit and is governed by a board of directors. It is registered with the Charities Regulatory Authority.

We deliver targeted support to our members through our National Support Services and our local Branches and Hubs. IFCA promotes the development of

positive change for children in alternative care, and influences policy, legislation, and opinion through our Advocacy work.

We believe in the value of foster care as an effective alternative for children who, for various reasons, are unable to live with their own families.

Foster care is complex and foster carers require a range of supports, and expert advice to enable foster carers provide the best possible care for the child/ children in their care. There were 5,841 children in care at the end of Q3 2021, 5,271 of which were in general (3,782) and relative (1,489) foster care¹.

There were 4,018 foster carers at the end of Q3 2021² as follows:

- ✓ General foster carers - 2,437
- ✓ Relative foster carers – 1,057
- ✓ Private foster carers - 524

Tusla's 2020 review of Adequacy, notes an 11% decrease in the numbers of foster carers since 2016. This is a concern, as the numbers of children requiring foster care has increased.

IFCA's submission to the Committee, is informed by its 40 years of experience in support foster care in Ireland and we welcome the opportunity to share this experience and knowledge with you.

I have included some more information about IFCA as an Appendix with this opening statement.

¹Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 3 2021.p.31.
https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q3_2021_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report_Final_v1.0.pdf

² Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 3 2021.p.48.
https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q3_2021_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report_Final_v1.0.pdf

Importance of Foster Care

Foster Care is the backbone of care for children who are in the care of the State in Ireland. Ireland is unique in this respect, in that the majority of these children are growing up as happy, confident young people, who attend school every day and for some will be focussing on the upcoming state exams, and all within a family home environment. Children in foster care are thriving and foster families are offering secure, happy, and fulfilling childhoods to children, supporting them to reach their full potential.

OVERVIEW OF FOSTER CARE IN IRELAND

The placement of children in foster care in Ireland is legislated for in the Child Care Act 1991³, The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995⁴, and the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations 1995⁵, as amended, the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003⁶, all of which are underpinned by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Irish Government in 1991⁷.

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 with approximately 92% of children placed in foster care. Foster families offer warm caring family life to children, tending to their physical, social, emotional, and other needs which are underpinned by

³ The Child Care Act (1991) Department of Health

⁴ The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995, Department of Health and Children.

⁵ The Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives Regulations 1995, Department of Health and Children.

⁶ The National Standards for Foster Care (2003), Department of Health and Children.

⁷ UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), UNCRC.

the stability of family life. Foster care can be offered to a child for either a short- or long-term basis. Short term foster care is for a period of less than six months' duration. Foster carers support children who may be dealing with issues of neglect, abuse, or abandonment and help them to feel supported, loved and accepted unconditionally.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Tusla, (Child and Family Agency) has the statutory responsibility to approve foster carers and place children with them. The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) sets the Standards for the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

The process of becoming a foster carer is rigorous and is governed by the Procedures and Guidelines for Foster Care Committees (2017)⁸, which outlines the assessment process of prospective foster carers. Foster Care Committees are convened by Tusla and they approve foster care applicants.

When a person, (and their family), applies to become a foster carer, they are subject to a thorough assessment to comply with Tusla's, (2017), *Policy, Procedures and best Practice Guidance*. Section 4.7 of this policy is entitled, *Availability to care for children in care, which states;*

It is necessary in the interests of meeting the needs of vulnerable children that at least one foster carer is available to care for the child on a full-time basis. Applications may be accepted from working parents depending on their actual availability to the child.

⁸ Tusla Guidelines and Procedures for Foster Care Committees (2017).

One carer must be available to provide day to day care for the child, to work in partnership with the HSE, (Tusla), to facilitate contact with birth parents and siblings, bring children to school, attend child care reviews and attend training. Consideration of approval of working applicants/carers looks at their availability to meet the child's needs. Children who need short-term, emergency or respite care require a full-time foster carer from the time they join the family.

PENSIONS FOR FOSTER CARERS

The vast majority of foster carers have been requested to relinquish their employment on becoming a foster carer, to meet the myriad of complex needs of children coming into Care.

Foster carers receive a weekly allowance **for the child**, who is placed with them to cover their needs. If the child remains in placement with them following six months, they can then receive child benefit.

Foster carers **do not receive any payment for themselves**, which results in their not having adequate social welfare credits for eligibility for the contributory state retirement pension.

Foster carers can qualify for the Home Carer Period scheme if the following criteria are met:

- Provision of full-time care for:
 - a child or children under 12 years
 - a child or children over 12 years who needed an increased level of care or
 - an adult who needed an increased level of care
- not be employed, self-employed or training outside the home

- not have had a paid, credited or reckonable voluntary contribution during the period they are providing the home care
- not in receipt of a weekly payment from the Department of Social Protection (other than child benefit)
- can demonstrate that due to the nature and extent of their home caring responsibilities they were unable to engage in insurable employment and self-employment
- the person for whom the home caring was provided meets the required conditions

The majority of children in foster care remain with their foster carers to the age of 23, which is the age of leaving care if in full-time education or training, or beyond this age.

Foster carers are at a distinct disadvantage, as most of them have been requested to remain at home to meet the care needs of the foster child. They are not entitled to “sign on” for social welfare credits, as they are not, “available” for work.

Recognition of the role of foster carers for children in state care is currently not adequately considered in the Social Welfare system, particularly in relation to state pension contributions. Currently the investment in time and care by foster carers does not trigger contributions towards the state contributory pension for the full duration of care provision leaving foster carers at risk of poverty in their later years while performing an essential service to the state. This is not an equitable or sustainable situation if the state wishes to continue to leverage alternative home care as a State intervention for the Alternative Care System, in the future.

- ✓ While foster carers can qualify for the Home Caring Period Scheme, it is limited and restricted to children under the age of 12 or and ill/ disabled person over the age of 12. We believe the age restriction should be raised to a minimum of 23 years of age based on the aftercare supports required by vulnerable children in care. This would be a more complete reflection of the time contribution by foster carers and tangibly acknowledge the key support provided by foster carers in addressing social challenges to the state.
- ✓ Where a foster carer remains on the Tusla approval panel of foster carers and remains available for receiving a child into foster care, they should continue to be included for state contributory pensions contributions purposes for the entire period of being on the approved panel. This will facilitate retention of foster carers between placements, ensure a sustainable pipeline of foster carers, and encourage the return of foster carers to provide the vital care they provide to our state's most vulnerable children.
- ✓ We request that retrospective contributions be paid by the Exchequer for any gaps for long term carers and advocate for foster carers to be included in this long term carer cohort for the period they are foster parents even if it is less than the pension commission defined period of 20 years.

We advocate for the age cut-off be extended from 12 years of age to a minimum of 23 years of age to reflect the additional support required by children in care and to ensure the continuity of support that is provided by foster carers.

- ✓ Currently foster carers are not getting contributory pension contributions for the period of time where the criteria outlined above is not applicable and this needs to be urgently addressed.

- ✓ Foster Carers, who have contributed to the State Alternative Care system to offer loving, stable safe and caring homes to children in the Care of the State, are disadvantaged by the social welfare system whilst they play a vital role for our society.

The Foster Care Allowance

Foster carers receive a weekly allowance for caring for a child who is in the care of the State. The fostering allowance for children under the age of 12 years is €325 per child per week and is increased to €352 for children over 12 years. The allowance provides the foster carer to meet all of the needs of the child. When a young person reaches the age of 18 years they are formally not in care. However, where a young person remains living with their foster carer and continues to participate in full-time education or training, a reduced after care allowance of €300 is made.

The foster care allowance has remained static since 2009. The increasing costs of living, with inflation currently running at 12.3% to the end of April this year, has reduced the value of allowance. Economic forecasts inform us that inflation is set to rise further.

IFCA intends to submit a pre-budget submission to government on the foster care allowance, and we would welcome an opportunity to discuss this further with the Committee in the near future.

THANK YOU, CHAIRPERSON AND COMMITTEE, AND MEMBERS

Ends

APPENDIX 1 – iFCA’s 2020 Annual Report

[https://ifca.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/15578 IFCA Annual Report Web
.pdf](https://ifca.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/15578_IFCA_Annual_Report_Web.pdf)