KEEP YOUR PROMISES

Irish Foster Care Association

Budget 2024

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Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA)

In Ireland, the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) is a beacon of support and guidance for foster families and the wider fostering community.

At the heart of IFCA's mission lies a belief in a society where fostering is not only recognised but also valued and supported for the crucial role it plays in transforming the lives of vulnerable children. With a focus on building and supporting strong, nurturing families, the association endeavours to create an environment where every child in care can find love, care, and stability.

IFCA's support for foster families encompasses a wide spectrum of services tailored to meet the unique needs of caregivers and children alike. Among an array of offerings, the National Helpline, Advocacy, and Counselling services serve as a lifeline for foster families facing challenges. Trained professionals lend a sympathetic ear, provide timely and valuable advice, and advocate on behalf of families to try to ensure they receive the support they require.

Recognising the importance of continuous learning and development, IFCA is committed to enhancing the knowledge and skills of foster families. Through publications on research and best practices in foster care, caregivers are given access to insights that empower them to provide the best possible care for their children.

Local IFCA branches and hubs play a pivotal role in in providing foster families with a vital support network. By engaging with foster carers at ta community level, IFCA helps foster camaraderie and provide a platform for caregivers to share their experiences, their knowledge, and to find strength and support. The sense of belonging and mutual understanding that these local connections offer are invaluable for every stakeholder in the fostering journey.

The main event in IFCA's calendar is the Annual National Conference which brings together the wider fostering community. This gathering provides a space for meaningful connections, mutual learning, and peer empowerment.

Fostering is a cornerstone of building brighter futures for some of the most vulnerable children. IFCA brings together those who are involved in the lives of the children who are fostered to help make foster care the very best it can be.

Urgent Call for Enhanced Support to Foster Carers in Budget 2024: IFCA's Pre-Budget Submission

To the Irish Government,

We, the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA), submit this urgent plea on behalf of foster carers across the State. It is with great concern that we highlight the distressing state of foster care in Ireland and the neglect being endured by the very backbone of the system - dedicated foster carers. The contributions of foster families to the lives of vulnerable children are immeasurable, providing safe, nurturing, and supportive homes for those who face significant adversity in their early childhoods.

The current situation is dire, and foster carers have now reached a breaking point. Despite being recognised as the best option for the vast majority children in need of alternative care, foster families have been consistently overlooked in Government budget allocations year after year. Promises of proper support and funding from successive governments have been repeatedly broken, leaving foster carers undervalued and unsupported.

The foster care system is faltering. Many foster carers are struggling to meet the challenges of providing day-to-day care for children, with some being forced to make heart-wrenching decisions including ceasing their involvement with fostering altogether. The State's failure to invest in foster carers has exacerbated the challenges that foster families face. This jeopardises the well-being of both the carers and the children they care for.

IFCA's pre-budget submission titled 'Keep Your Promises' aims to shed light on the urgent need for enhanced support to foster carers. Our proposals are reasonable, achievable and informed by the lived experiences of foster carers. Fostering positive change starts with acknowledging the critical role played by these selfless individuals and there is critical need to provide them with the resources and assistance they require to carry out their invaluable work.

In Budget 2024, we are asking the government to take decisive action in prioritising foster carers and addressing the concerning decline in their support, recruitment and retention. Foster carers are the lifeblood of the foster care system, and without supporting them in their crucial role then their ability to transform foster children’s lives and provide them with a platform to flourish is critically undermined.

The State's continued failure to support foster carers urgently needs to be rectified in the upcoming budget. IFCA's 'Keep Your Promises' submission outlines a clear path toward a stronger and more sustainable foster care system, based on adequate support and recognition for foster carers.

It is time for the Government to act decisively and to invest in helping foster carers to do what they do best - care for, love, protect, and nurture the children who have experienced profound adversity. By doing so, the Government can create a brighter future for some of the most vulnerable children in the State through helping to meet their needs, upholding their rights and better supporting the foster families that open their hearts and homes to foster children.

Yours sincerely,

Raymond Nolan
Chairperson
Irish Foster Care Association

Why Fostering is the Better Option

The concerns raised recently by Judge Simms regarding the absence of properly regulated and appropriate placements for residential care, and special care and that these have been flagged as deeply troubling by the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO).

It is imperative to recognise that children in care are among the most vulnerable members of society, and it is our duty to ensure they receive the necessary support and care. However, providing adequate support becomes challenging when these children lack a suitable, secure, and stable living environment. Efforts must be made to address this issue and guarantee that every child in care has a safe and nurturing place to call home.

Fostering is often a better option in Ireland than care homes or other alternatives for children in emergency care due to several concerning issues highlighted in recent reports:

1. **Unregulated and inadequate care:** Some children taken into emergency care are being placed in B&Bs that double up as care placements. Many of these properties are unregulated, raising serious concerns about the quality of care and safety provided to vulnerable children. This lack of proper regulation can lead to substandard living conditions and inadequate support.

2. **"Systemic" shortcomings:** Concern’s such as those expressed by Judge Simms over the welfare of children in care due to current "systemic" shortcomings have been widely reported. This points to deep-rooted problems within the system that are negatively affecting the well-being of children in care.

3. **Staffing issues:** Tusla, the Child and Family Agency is facing challenges related to unfilled posts due to a shortage of qualified personnel and staff retention issues. Insufficient staffing can result in a lack of attention and support for the children under their care.

4. **Ombudsman for Children's Office concerns:** The OCO has raised specific concerns with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, about the use of private providers and the need to ensure an adequate level of care for all children.

5. **Vulnerability of children in care:** Children in care are among the most vulnerable individuals, and it is crucial to provide them with the necessary supports. However, without suitable, secure, and stable living arrangements, it becomes challenging to meet their needs effectively.

6. **Proposal for legislative changes:** In May, the OCO suggested to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children to prohibit the placement of children in unregulated accommodation and impose a statutory duty for Tusla to ensure sufficient appropriate placements within each administrative area, especially for children in need of emergency accommodation.

In most circumstances, fostering presents a better option than care homes because it allows for a more personalised and regulated approach to caring for vulnerable children. Fostering involves placing children with carefully selected families who have been vetted and approved by social services. This arrangement provides a stable and nurturing environment for children, which is essential for their emotional and psychological well-being.

By prioritising fostering, the Irish government can ensure that children in emergency care have access to secure and suitable placements, reducing the risk of harm and improving their overall life outcomes. It also allows for closer monitoring and support from social workers, ensuring that the children's needs are met. The implementation of such changes would demonstrate a commitment to the welfare of children in care and address the reported shortcomings in the system.

The Cost-of-Living Crisis and the Impact on Foster Carers

The cost-of-living crisis in Ireland has had a profound impact on foster families, exacerbating the challenges they face in caring for foster children. The persistent inflation and rising cost of living in the country have put immense strain on foster carers. The primary payment which supports the cost of caring for children in foster care (the Foster Care Allowance) has remained stagnant since 2009. In effect this means, that the rising inflation has led to corresponding cuts to the critical financial support for foster families.

The high cost of living in Ireland makes it incredibly difficult for foster families to make ends meet. Basic necessities such as housing, utilities, food, and healthcare have each become more expensive, with a catastrophic impact on foster carers trying to provide a stable and nurturing environment for the children in their care. Naturally, this cost burden has a negative impact on both the foster carers and the children they look after. It is deeply unfair for the financial supports for foster carers not to be increased to reflect a record period of rising inflation.

Proposed Foster Care Priorities for Budget 2024:

1. **Increase the Foster Care Allowance**
   The Foster Care Allowance, which supports the cost of caring for children in foster care, has remained stagnant since 2009, while inflation has steadily increased. This is not equitable nor sustainable. As a result, there is an urgent need to address the inadequate foster care allowance. To rectify this issue, it is imperative to urgently address the matter and increase the Foster Care Allowance to a minimum of €500 so that it, at least, reflects the increase in inflation since 2009.

2. **Address Anomalies in Pension Contributions for Foster Carers**
   Foster carers who choose to provide care for children often sacrifice their employment, leading to a disadvantage in pension contributions towards the state non-contributory pension. Such carers are not considered available for work while fostering and receive no social welfare credits. Recognition of the role of foster carers in State care is not adequately considered in the social welfare system, particularly in relation to state pension contributions. Currently the investment of time by foster carers does not trigger contributions towards the state contributory pension. This discrimination must be rectified. The pension system must be urgently amended to ensure foster carers receive sufficient contributions to access the state's contributory pension. Currently, foster carers are risking poverty in their later years while performing an essential service for the State.

3. **Revise and Implement Equitable Mileage Allowances**
   Foster carers play a vital role in supporting children's appointments, visits with family members, therapies, and more. However, they are expected to cover the first 150 km of travel expenses, despite the fact that this travel is made on behalf of the State which has the responsibility of acting as the legal parent of the child in care. To ensure fair treatment and adequate financial support, the excess mileage charge should be removed, and travel costs should be calculated to reflect the distances travelled from each foster carer's home.

4. **Extend Eligibility for the Back-to-School Clothing & Footwear Allowance**
   Foster carers are currently excluded from applying for the Back-to-School Allowance. The Foster Care Allowance is patently not sufficient to cover the cost of clothing and footwear for the child along with other associated school and education costs. This exclusion leaves foster carers financially exposed with a clearly inadequate allocation. To help alleviate this issue, foster children should be eligible for the back-to-school allowance.

5. **Provide Start-up Costs for New Placements**
   Children entering foster care often have minimal belongings and there are naturally material, initial/start-up costs in providing essential items for a child in a new placement. To support foster carers in providing the best possible care for these children, a grant should be provided at the start of all new placements.

Investment in the Foster Care System: A Critical Call to Action

As of January 2023, there were 5,597 children in care, 5,049 of whom were being looked after by foster families. Often these children have faced neglect, abuse, and unsafe environments, leading to the need for alternative care. Foster families take in these vulnerable children and care for them.

Fostering is an extremely challenging role. Foster carers undergo extensive training and assessments to prepare for the task at hand. They work tirelessly, alongside social workers, to meet the complex needs of the children they care for. They play a crucial role in healing the emotional wounds of these children and helping them build resilience to face the world.

The investment required from foster carers is immense. Their lives are upended, routines disrupted, and their own families adapt to accommodate the needs of each foster child. They invest emotionally, psychologically, and financially in providing the best care possible. They expect the State and its agencies to reciprocate by providing adequate support and resources.

Sadly, the State is consistently letting its foster families down and this crucial support is not being provided. Foster carers are burdened with additional and inequitable financial costs, regularly having to cover expenses that should be borne by the State for children in care who are being failed by the State. This untenable situation has led to a severe decline in the number of foster carers available to care for children in need.

At the end of January 2023, there were only 3,941 foster carers on the approved panel, down from 4,384 in 2017. This decrease of 343 foster carers means there are 343 fewer homes available for vulnerable children, resulting in a pressing and well reported shortage of foster care placements.

This scarcity of available foster carers has serious implications, forcing children into residential care settings that might not be best suited for their well-being (residential care, while suitable for some young people, is not ideal for those who could thrive in a family environment through foster care).

The financial disparity between foster care and residential care is glaring. A residential care placement costs on average a staggering €306,624 per year, while a foster care placement costs significantly less (on average €16,896 per year). The economic case for supporting foster carers appropriately is as clear as the moral case.
Foster care is a vital and cost-effective alternative for vulnerable children, offering them a nurturing family environment. However, the system's viability is under threat due to the lack of adequate investment and support from the State. We cannot continue tolose more foster carers and further limit the number of safe and loving homes available to these children.

It is time for urgent and substantive investment in the foster care system. Funding must be increased to appropriately support foster carers and to ensure the well-being of the children they care for. Failure to act now will continue to deprive vulnerable children of the loving homes they deserve.

Case Study 1

Challenges Faced by Foster Families in the Current Economic Climate

Fostering families encounter significant financial and emotional burdens as they care for vulnerable children in the face of rising living costs and limited support. The escalating expenses for essential food, clothing, fuel, and housing have stretched foster families' budgets to the breaking point.

One foster parent has highlighted to IFCA the lack of a travel allowance for access visits and the absence of extra compensation for including foster children on their health insurance. Despite this, they willingly choose to provide the best care possible, ensuring their foster children do not miss out on essential healthcare services. However, expenses for private health issues and participation in hobbies and sports, including camps, place further strain on the already modest fostering allowance.

Other foster parents have highlighted to IFCA the importance of saving for their foster children's future, which is not catered for currently under the foster care allowance meaning that there is no effective State provision for foster children when they turn 18. This situation is deeply unfair, as foster families contend with the financial challenges while coping with the complexities of caring for traumatized children.

The financial strain has led to some foster carers abandoning their roles due to the extreme lack of support compounded by an accelerated rise in the high cost of day-to-day living. The fostering allowance falls short, barely covering the expenses for basic necessities, such as clothes, especially for teenagers, where a single pair of shoes consumes a significant portion of the allowance. Activities with friends or social outings can quickly accumulate expenses, exacerbating the financial burden on foster families.

Moreover, costs associated with extracurricular activities, camps, and sports gear continue to rise, making it increasingly difficult for foster families to provide these opportunities to their foster children. Despite the desire to treat them like their peers and offer the same experiences, the current economic climate makes it increasingly challenging to do so.

The situation is particularly daunting during special occasions like Christmas, where foster families face significant upfront expenses for gifts, essentials, school supplies, and uniforms. These costs further strain their limited budget, making it challenging to make ends meet during the holiday season.

The complexities of foster care extend beyond financial challenges. Foster families must juggle multiple responsibilities, including managing various appointments, meetings, and access arrangements, all of which come with additional expenses for fuel, vehicle maintenance, and meals on-the-go.

In conclusion, foster families are facing a multitude of challenges due to the increasing costs of living amid severely limited support. The fostering allowance falls critically short in covering basic needs and essential activities for foster children. As a result, foster parents are forced to bear a significant financial burden and often struggle to make ends meet. The lack of adequate financial support and the demanding nature of fostering in an environment of very limited support have driven some caregivers to step away from their roles. Addressing these challenges and providing greater support to foster families is crucial to ensure the well-being of both the caregivers and the children in their care.

Case Study 2

<u>Pension Discrimination</u>

Marie is 56 and has fostered for the past ten years. If she continues fostering, Marie will not have the required contributions for the contributory pension.

The dilemma facing Marie is, does she continue to care for a foster child in her care, in the knowledge that she will lose out on the contributory pension or decide to return to work to have credits to satisfy the criteria for the contributory pension.

Returning to work is likely to mean Marie must cease being a foster carer. Marie has dedicated herself to the care of a foster child for the past ten years. She has brought him through very stressful and challenging times to a point where he feels comfortable with others, is doing well at school, has friends and talks about being a paramedic when he is older.

Effectively, due to the unfair treatment of foster carers in relation to the state contributory pension. Marie will be forced to choose between continuing to provide foster care to the child in her care or to provide herself with the basic protection of the state contributory pension. This is an inequitable and unsustainable choice to impose on people providing an essential service to the State. Such a choice is clearly not in the best interests of children in foster care.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Irish foster care system demands urgent attention and dedicated effort from policymakers to fortify its foundations and enhance its efficacy. As we approach the upcoming budgetary considerations, it is imperative that we prioritise the well-being of vulnerable children in foster care, recognising that their future and potential lie in our collective actions today.

IFCA firmly believes that a well-funded and well-structured foster care system can make an immeasurable difference in the lives of countless children, enabling them to grow in a nurturing and supportive environment. By investing in foster care services, we not only uplift the lives of individual children but also contribute to the broader welfare of society by which benefits from these children flourishing. As we have outlined above, the enhancement of foster care provision, increased financial support, and the implementation of comprehensive support programs for foster families are essential steps towards ensuring a brighter future for some of the most vulnerable children in Ireland.

To achieve this vision, we urge the government to allocate the necessary increased resources for foster care in the upcoming budget. Adequate funding will help provide the necessary resources to address the unique needs of children in care. We ask the Government to work with IFCA towards a future where every child in foster care is given the opportunity to thrive,

In conclusion, investing in Ireland's foster care system is not just an expenditure; it is an investment in the future of our nation. By prioritising the well-being and potential of these young lives, we strengthen the fabric of our society and foster a sense of compassion and solidarity that extends far beyond budgetary considerations. We ask the Government to seize this opportunity to make a profound and lasting difference in the lives of Ireland's foster families by bolstering our commitment to building a stronger, more inclusive, and compassionate society for all. By implementing the five pillars outlined above, the Government has the ability to create a brighter, more promising tomorrow for those who need it the most.