



FOSTER CARE

An information booklet on
Foster Care in Ireland

Irish
Foster Care
Association

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Introduction

Fostering is caring for someone else's child in your own home – providing family life for a child who for one reason or another cannot live with their own family, either on a short or long term basis.

This booklet will give you an insight into foster care; it looks at the different types of foster care and foster carers, outlines the assessment and registration process, looks at the role of Tusla – Child & Family Agency and foster families and the needs of young people in care.



Foster Care

All parents set out with the best intentions in the world; however, sometimes the realities of parenting are too much. Families are unable to manage for a variety of reasons. When it is assessed that it is no longer possible for children to remain at home with their parents due to abuse or neglect experiences, they are received into the care of the State, either with the agreement of their parents or through the intervention of the courts.

Foster care in Ireland is governed by the Child Care Act 1991 and the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 .

The State's responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of children whose parents fail in their duty falls to Tusla – Child & Family Agency by virtue of the Child Care Act 1991. The 1991 Act confers both a statutory power and duty upon Tusla to protect children and promote their welfare.

The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 require that a Care Plan for the child is drawn up which sets out the support to be provided to the child and the foster carers and the arrangements for family contact to the child in foster care by parents or relatives.

The National Standards for Foster Care, 2003 have a major role to play in ensuring that foster care placements are adequately supported and that children in foster care receive the best possible care.

Types of Foster Care

Short-term Placements – Short-term foster care provides temporary care for a child separated from their birth family. The child may, after a period, move back to their family or move on to a long term foster family.

Long-term Placements – Long-term foster care is needed for children who are unlikely to be able to live with their birth family, and who, for a variety of reasons cannot be adopted. Many children in long-term care become so much a part of their foster family that they continue to live with them until their independence, as the birth children of the foster family do. However, a child may still move back to their birth family from a long-term placement.

Emergency Care Placements – Emergency care is where a child comes into care very quickly and is placed with emergency foster families. It could also happen that an existing placement breaks down and a child needs to be moved quickly and is placed with emergency foster families.

Respite Care – Respite care is defined in the National Standards for Foster Care as ‘short term care provided to a child in order to support the child, his or her parent(s) or foster families by providing a break for the child and their primary caregivers.’ Respite can play an invaluable role in preventing placement breakdown. Respite care is not a ‘right’ for the foster family and must form part of the child’s Care Plan.

Day Foster Care – This is a placement with a foster family during the day. This gives the child’s family an opportunity to deal with their difficulties. The child will return to their birth parent in the evening and sleep at home. The goal here is that the child will return to living at home on a full-time basis.

Parent and Child Placements – In some situations, where it is judged to be in the best interest of the mother or the baby, a young mother and her baby may be placed in foster care.

Note: in parent and child placements the baby/child may not be in foster care but will reside in the foster home with their mother who is in care. It is important that this is clear to the foster family before placement.

(See Tusla – Child & Family Agency Policy, Procedures and Best Practice Guidance on the Status and Care of Babies of Young Parents in 2012)



Special Foster Care – Special foster care is a provision for children and young people whose behaviour is such that it poses a real and substantial risk to their health, safety, development or welfare.

Special foster care is provided by carers who are specifically trained and skilled to care for children with high level needs.

Supported Lodgings – Supported lodgings is the provision of accommodation, support and a family setting to young people who cannot live at home, but are not ready to live independently. The provider of supported lodgings will work in partnership with the young person and their social worker in preparing them for independent living at a future date. Supported lodgings should only be considered for young people aged 16 and above, who are deemed, through a thorough assessment process, capable of living independently without a full range of supports.

Foster Families

Many different types of people can provide foster care:

- Couples – married, co-habiting, same gender
- Single people – widowed, separated, divorced
- People with disabilities – provided your disability or medical condition does not prevent you from caring for a child
- People with or without children
- People who own their own homes, are in private rented accommodation or local authority housing
- Employed/unemployed people
- People from different cultures, ethnic or religious backgrounds – having carers from different cultures allows matching of children and young people with suitable families.

General Foster Care is provided by a person who having completed a process of assessment and training is placed on a panel of approved foster carers to care for children in the care of the State in accordance with the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995, and the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations, 1995. Foster carers provide a service to Tusla – Child & Family Agency or private foster care agencies.

Relative Foster Care is provided by a member of the child's family, a grand parent, an aunt or uncle or a person very well known to the child and their family. Before making a decision about the relative being a foster carer, Tusla will make an assessment which will focus on the needs of the child and the relatives ability to meet those needs.



Tusla – Child and Family Agency was established on the 1st January 2014 and is now the dedicated State agency responsible for improving well-being and outcomes for children. Tusla is the only organisation that provides a statutory fostering service to the public.

Roles and Responsibilities:

Child in Care Social Worker: is the social worker assigned to carry out Tusla's statutory functions for the safety and welfare of a child in foster care.

Fostering Link Social Worker: is the social worker with responsibility for carrying out the assessment of general and relative care applicants, delivering pre and post placement training and may also be responsible for the on-going supervision and support of carers post approval. Also, like the child in care social worker, the fostering social worker's statutory obligation is primarily to the child in care.

Social Work Team Leader: is responsible for overseeing the work of social workers in meeting the statutory requirements, including care planning, Child in Care reviews, the visiting of children, facilitation of reasonable family contact, assessment of carers, training and the provision of link social work services as relevant. Other key areas of responsibility include the supervision of social workers and responding to complaints and allegations.

Principal Social Worker: is responsible for managing social work practice effectively within their department in accordance with the child care legislation, standards, and the policies and procedures of Tusla, as well as overseeing the delivery of a high-quality service for children, their family and carers (as per Standard 19 of the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003).

Foster Care Monitor: refers to the person who is appointed to quality assure and monitor foster care services separate from Tusla line management structure. The monitor ensures compliance with statutory requirements and standards and

ensures equity of service provision.

Foster Care Register: Tusla maintains a register of all approved foster carers who are fostering on behalf of the Agency or private foster care agencies.

Foster Care Committees (FCCs): provide governance in foster care services and aim to act as a guide and a support to the work done in assessing foster care applicants. They are an essential part of a collaborative process which aims to ensure that children in care are placed in foster families who are deemed to be capable of meeting their assessed needs.

Recruitment of Foster Carers



Tusla – Child & Family Agency and private foster care agencies operate within equality legislation and bear a commitment to equal opportunities.

Enquiries into foster care are welcome irrespective of race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, disability or marital status.

Enquiries are managed initially over the phone and should be followed up by a home visit.

This is an opportune time for potential carers to;

- Understand what is required of them as foster carers
- Ascertain their willingness to participate in an assessment that can be quite intrusive.

And for the social worker;

- It is a process of encouraging and supporting potential carers to make an application
- However it is not a question and answer session but should be a screening process to eliminate those who do not meet the criteria.

The assessment process is a long, time consuming and costly exercise for both parties. It is therefore important that the initial screening phase is carried out.

Once it is agreed that a potential carer meets the criteria and is still interested, an application form and information pack is sent to them.

Assessment and Approval

Foster care applicants participate in a comprehensive assessment of their ability to carry out the fostering task and are formally approved by Tusla's Foster Care Committee prior to any child or young person being placed with them.

The assessment will require:

- Garda Vetting
- Child protection checks
- Medical reports: physical and mental health
- Public health nurse's report if applicable
- Name of two referees who are not related to the applicant. Where applicants have previously worked or currently work with children, an additional third reference will be requested by the social worker from their employer seeking their opinion on their suitability to foster. Referees will be interviewed briefly by the social worker.

Other documentation required includes but is not limited to:

- Birth, Marriage Certificate or Separation/Divorce documentation
- Statement of earnings from employers or social welfare number.

The assessment itself takes numerous aspects of the potential carer's life into account. These include current adult relationships; the household membership; social and support network; employment and financial circumstances. It is also necessary for an appropriate health and safety check to be carried out on the household.

An analysis of the above gathered information is presented in a standardised report with a recommendation made in relation to the suitability of the potential foster carer to meet children(s) assessed need and meet the criteria for fostering. The report is compiled by the social worker and quality assured by their team leader and/or principal social worker and presented in person to the Foster Care Committee. Fostering applicants are given the opportunity to see and sign the report prior to the report being sent to the committee and invited to make comments on same. Applicants have the option to meet the Foster

Care Committee which will consider their application.

They will be advised beforehand that there are three possible outcomes from the presentation of their assessment report:

- The application may be recommended
- It may be refused
- The assessing social worker may be asked to provide more information.

No assessment will take place until the Garda Vetting has been completed and cleared by the supervising foster care team leader.

Relative Care Section 36(1) (d) of the 1991 Child Care Act allows for the emergency placement of a child or young person with a relative prior to full approval. Relatives who apply or are requested to apply to care for a child or young person participate in a comprehensive assessment of their ability to care for the child or young person and should be formally approved by the Foster Care Committee within 12 weeks of placement, unless more time is required. The family should be informed of the reasons for any extension by the assessing social worker and given a new completion date.

Emergency approval is **only** permissible in the circumstance of relative care and involves:

- Completion of a Garda Vetting form
- Completion of child protection checks
- Initial screening of the home environment to ensure it fulfils certain minimum suitability standards, i.e. safety and living conditions
- Interview with all adults in the home
- Interview with at least one referee.



No child will be placed with a non-relative foster family unless they have been approved by Tusla's Foster Care Committee.

Some of the topics discussed with prospective foster families during the assessment home visits include but is not limited to:

- Family history including life experiences from an early age as these may be of help in taking care of foster children
- Experience of parenting and looking after children, as well as the needs of any child/children already in their care
- Relationships with own family, e.g. how decisions are made and how prospective families spend their time
- Relationships with former partners
- Relationships with the children's birth parents/grandparents and extended family
- How you will work with social workers and other professionals who are involved in the foster children's life
- Practical issues e.g. accommodation/work/babysitting arrangements which will be affected by fostering.

Qualities applicants are expected to demonstrate:

- A healthy respect and commitment to the care of children/young people
- Flexible attitudes and non-judgmental perspective on life
- Ability to negotiate and compromise when faced with change, stress and challenge
- Ability to understand and accept a child who has been abused or neglected
- Ability to understand and accept the circumstances of the child's parents
- Ability to accept the child's behaviour as a communication of their feelings
- Ability to help the child understand the reason for the separation from their parents without prejudice
- Openness to training to increase their skills and knowledge about fostering once they have a child placed
- Openness to involvement with social workers who supervise and support

foster care placements

- Openness to support regular contact between the child and their birth family.

Allowances and supports for foster/relative carers:

- Fostering Allowance – the Department of Children and Youth Affairs set the amount of the allowance. The allowance does not affect social welfare payments.
- Child Benefit
- Medical Card for each foster child.

Criteria against which foster care/relative applicants are assessed:

- Ability to meet the overall needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect and those who need care and protection
- Ability to meet the child's assessed needs as outlined in the care plan where applications pertain to specific children
- Interest in and concern for children and their rights is the primary motivation to foster
- Ability to provide safe care to children who have experienced abuse or neglect
- Ability to manage children's behaviour without the use of physical or demeaning punishments
- Commitment to facilitate contact between children and their birth families, where desirable
- Commitment to preserve a child's ethnic and cultural identity
- Commitment to include the foster child as a full family member while accepting the possibility of the child's reunification with their birth family
- Commitment to safeguard the child's confidential information
- Commitment to promote children's education and health
- No criminal convictions for offences against the person which indicate possible safe care concerns for children in care
- Enough time in applicants' lives to enable them to care for foster children as well as their own children, where relevant

- Good enough physical and mental health for all members of applicants' immediate family
- No current addictions amongst applicants' household members
- No current domestic violence experience in applicants' lives
- Applicants are of an age that ensures there is a reasonable expectation that they can provide adequate care for the child in the future
- Stability in applicants' own lives and in their close relationships
- For childless applicants, an ability to accept that the child they may foster cannot replace the child they might have had themselves and evidence of equal motivation in joint application
- Youngest child in applicant's family is aged not less than three years old. (Exceptions may be made for relative care applicants in some instances)
- Adequate security and stability in applicant's children's lives to enable them to withstand the challenges of foster care
- Adequate accommodation to provide a safe and healthy environment to cater for a foster child's development
- Ability to manage personal finances
- Commitment to use the foster care allowance to care for the child
- Adequate personal support structures to assist them to foster
- Evidence that applicants can seek and accept support when necessary
- Commitment to protect children from the effects of passive smoking in the foster home by providing a smoke free environment
- Commitment to attend pre-placement and post-placement fostering training
- Ability to work as part of a team with Tusla – Child & Family Agency or private foster care agencies with a commitment to operating within relevant standards, policies and guidance.

Having an available panel of assessed, trained and approved foster carers to choose from allows fostering teams match children with families best placed to meet their needs.

Foster Carer Reviews

Foster carer reviews refer to the process whereby foster carers, including relative carers participate in regular reviews of their continuing capacity to provide high quality care and to assist with the identification of gaps/supports in the fostering service.

The review is an opportunity for the family to discuss any issues which may be of concern to them or to celebrate achievements that may have occurred over the last year; foster carers should think carefully about the issues they would wish to raise. It is an opportunity to comment upon the support received from the fostering service and the child's social worker; these comments can be put in writing at the review.

The reviews should be held one year after the first placement and then every three years. Additional reviews are held following allegations or investigations of abuse or neglect (if founded or unfounded), serious concerns (if founded or unfounded) or in other circumstances where, in the opinion of any party involved, one is warranted,

Foster carer review agenda will include the following:

- An update of information
- Any changes in circumstances e.g. change in family composition/new partner relationship
- Ability to care (performance)
- Foster family's experience of fostering
- Complaints, serious concerns or allegations
- Training and support needs
- Foster children's views
- Birth parents' views
- Foster carers' own children's views.

After the first review each subsequent review should include updates of Garda Vetting and clearance for all household members over 16 years.

Matching Children and Carers

Matches are achieved by means of information sharing and discussion involving all relevant professionals, foster children and their families, where appropriate, and the proposed foster carers, their families and other children in the placements.

Principles of matching carers:

- Children and young people are placed with families who are chosen for their capacity to meet the assessed needs of the child/young person
- Matching carers with children is based on the written assessment of the child's needs and their care plans
- The child's views are considered in accordance with their age, stage of development and individual needs
- The needs of other children.

Fostering Contract



The National Standards for Foster Care and the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995, Part III, Article 9 (1), (2)

stipulate that foster carers should be issued with a formal contract in respect of each child placed in their care; a copy will also be placed on your foster care file.

This contract sets out your obligations and duties to the child in your care, that you will do so on behalf of Tusla and that you will be required to take all reasonable measures to promote the child's health, development and welfare.

It stipulates that you will work with Tusla to achieve this by facilitating family visits (access), observing confidentiality, and sharing information concerning the child. This will also include sharing any changes to your own circumstances that might affect the welfare of the child.

Training

Pre-assessment and Children First Training is compulsory. Engaging in ongoing training is necessary for all foster carers to equip and support their knowledge and skills to provide the highest quality of care.

The Irish Foster Care Association offers members training and learning opportunities to support and assist foster carers in their role. Visit www.ifca.ie for more information.

Supervision & Support

Foster families are provided with a support system from Tusla – Child & Family Agency or private foster care agencies to enable them to provide a good standard of care for the children they look after. This includes:

- Every foster carer should have access to a link social worker for supervision and support
- Link workers should have contact with foster carers regularly via telephone and visits
- Access to regular support/training group meetings where topics of interest are discussed
- Each child in foster care has a child in care social worker who visits the child in the foster home and maintains a link with the child's birth family
- Where a child needs specialised services, professionals can be accessed if necessary, for example, speech therapists, counselling services, psychologists etc.
- Respite care for foster children may be arranged if necessary and appropriate where it is part of the care plan.

Support for foster carers: Gilligan (2000) speaks of the scaffolding of support needed by children in care and their carers and of the challenge of agencies and authorities to promote the right degree of space and support for all the partners in fostering.

Safe Care Practices



Safe care can be viewed as measures taken that are necessary for caring for and living with young people in a manner that acknowledges their right to live in as normal an environment as possible. The key to safe care is knowledge and sharing of information. The ethos of working together and sharing of information between foster carers and social workers is vital in ensuring safe care for children/young people and foster carers.

The role of a foster carer is to act as a parent for vulnerable children. All young people and children have the right to be loved and receive appropriate affection. Foster carers need to find a balance between this and safeguarding themselves and their families.

- Most homes have accepted norms within daily living, therefore acknowledging that there is some behaviour that is not within the norm. For example everyone in the home is appropriately dressed at breakfast, doors are closed at shower time (for older children). Letting children and young people know what is acceptable within the household is important from early in the placement. They will then experience these norms within their daily experiences of the family.
- Have an awareness of children/young people's life experiences and use this information to advise and inform in relation to making decisions about time alone, contact with friends, sharing bedrooms, bath times, play etc.
- Social workers and foster carers should have discussions and share their experiences when making decisions about overnights, discos, access to social media, etc.
- Teaching children/young people boundaries and assisting them in expressing their emotions in a way that is positive for them and those around them is an important developmental role of fostering. This would include teaching appropriate means of displaying affection and ways to communicate anger, hurt and upset.

Role and Responsibilities of Foster Carers

Accepting the child: Building self-esteem

The carer gives the child the message that he or she is unconditionally accepted and valued for who they are: their difficulties as well as strengths. This helps the child to enjoy success and cope with setbacks.

Being available: Helping children to trust

The carer is available physically and emotionally to meet the child's needs whether they are together or apart. This secure base helps the child to:

- Feel safe
- Trust that his or her needs will be met consistently
- Gain the confidence to explore the world around them
- Learn to trust adults.

Responding sensitively: Helping children to manage feelings and behaviour

- Fostering requires you to 'stand in the child's shoes', to think about what the child may be thinking and feeling, and to reflect this back to the child
- That you are aware of your own feelings and you can share these sensitively with the child
- This helps the child to learn about and regulate their own feelings and to understand the thoughts and feelings of others.

Co-operative caring: Helping children to feel effective

- The carer is aware of the child as a separate person with wishes, feelings and goals and as someone who needs to feel effective
- The carer looks for ways to help the child feel more competent, such as by respecting the child's choices (within safe limits), using negotiation and co-operation to manage behaviour.

Promote independence and life skills

- This helps the child to feel their views are important and to learn to compromise and co-operate.

Promoting family membership: Helping children to belong

- The carer has the capacity to include the child in their family for however long the child is to stay
- The carer also helps the child to belong to two families – their birth family and the family they are part of now, so that the child learns it is possible to belong to/love two families
- This includes a non-judgemental acceptance of the child's birth family
- Foster carers play a critical role in helping children prepare for adult life.



Family Visits and Contact (Access)

The Child Care Act, 1991 Section 37: places a duty on Tusla to “facilitate reasonable access to the child by his parents, any person acting in loco parentis, or any other person who, in the opinion of Tusla has a bona fide interest in the child”.

Gilligan (2007) recommends encouraging “purposeful contact with family members and other key adults from the child’s past” in order for the child to receive from his family “the crucial message that he is cared about even though his family may not be able to care for him at the present time”. Gilligan argues that if ‘threads of contact’ are kept alive, reunification will still be a possibility, even when the child becomes an adult.

Traditionally, family visits and contact (access) is seen as meaning visits for children with their birth families whereas contact is a much broader concept including exchange of cards/letters/photos/telephone contact/sharing of school reports/etc.

There is no ‘magic formula’ for family visits and contact:

- Each child is unique
- Each family circumstance is different
- Each access plan needs to be worked out, agreed with all parties and form part of the Care Plan.

It is very important for a child in foster care to know who they are and why they are in care and to maintain links with their birth family. This requires understanding and collaboration between the foster carer, social worker and birth family. Arrangements for how visits and contact take place should be agreed with the social work department, the family, the foster carers and the child (age and stage appropriate).

Children/young people living in foster care may experience some feelings of guilt and/or anxiety in relation to family access, they may experience a sense of divided loyalties and therefore social workers and foster cares should spend time ensuring that family access is as positive an experience as possible for the child/young person.

Disruption



Some placements do not work out with the end result that the child has to move on.

Disruption is the term used for the premature ending of a planned placement of a child in foster care.

Disruption in foster care is a process which frequently entails a series of difficult events involving the child, their foster family and birth family. Only in an extremely serious situation will a disruption arise from an isolated incident. Following a disruption in placement a disruption meeting must be convened. The challenge in convening a disruption meeting is to manage and engage individuals, some of whom may be in a heightened state of emotion; bring them together to share their thoughts, feelings and ensure that all in attendance have their voice heard and positions acknowledged. It is often extremely difficult to work with children, carers and birth families after a disruption in foster care.

However, disruption meetings should be held in the hope that this will assist reflective practice regarding the contributing factors that lead to the breakdown in the foster care placement. Critical to this process is the expectation that the disruption meeting provides a therapeutic forum for all affected parties.

Foster carers should be encouraged to accept that:

- The placement has not worked for a valid reason or combination of reasons. It is not the first time such a situation has occurred and it will not be the last.
- It may be agreed that it is in the best interests of the child to move on. All members of the foster family should be helped to understand this.
- The foster family's initial motivation to help this child needs to be reactivated to prepare for moving on.
- Careful planning for the future must take cognisance of the hidden factor – the one which contributed to the disruption of the placement. All involved must be helped to understand what happened and why.

Responding to ‘Difficulties in Placements’

The Report of the Working Group on Foster Care: Foster Care a Child Centred Partnership (2001) states that “in general, minor problems relating to day-to-day issues in foster care should be resolved in a partnership spirit between the parties involved” (*Section 8.35*).

Difficulties in placements are usually things the child may not like about living in the foster home. Reports of difficulties can come from a wide variety of sources; from the child, the social worker, the foster carer or another professional.

Allegations/Complaints/Grievances

All children in alternative care, their parents, carers, staff or anyone with a bona fide interest in the welfare of the child is entitled to make a complaint or express a grievance. In any assessment of an allegation of abuse or complaint in relation to the care of a child in alternative care, the child's welfare is always considered to be paramount.

Under current legislation the reporting of abuse against children is mandatory. All allegations of abuse of a child in care must be reported to the Child Protection team under Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure children are protected.

The Children First Act, 2017 specifies that foster carers are 'Mandated Persons', this means that they are legally required to report their concerns related to a child's safety and protection to Tusla.

Other relevant documents include 'Our Duty to Care' and the 'Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook', copies of which can be found online or requested from your foster care agency or the Irish Foster Care Association.

Definition of 'complaints' and 'grievances'

It is very important that all reports received in relation to children in care are documented and defined in order to determine the response given. It is also important to note that, in the process of assessment of the report, the definition may change, for example, a complaint may be re-defined as an allegation when investigated.

The National Standards for Foster Care in its 'Guidance Note on Children's Complaints in Foster Care' defines a complaint as 'any expression of dissatisfaction about the quality, lack of, or refusal, of a service that the person complaining is entitled to use'.

Examples of a complaint can fall under several categories including access and contact arrangements, children's rights, physical environment, self-esteem and development. Examples can include:



- Failing to keep the child's family alive in the child's life
- Bedroom in a poor condition
- Carers not being respectful about child's family/background
- Child not being informed of their rights or of events relevant to their care
- Food preferences not taken into account
- Clothing is poor quality and ill fitting
- Child not being allowed to continue with a hobby that they want to do and enjoy (as agreed in their care plan)
- Child feeling he or she is treated differently to the rest of the children in the foster family.

Careful assessment of each complaint is necessary to ensure the complaint does not fall within the category of 'abuse'; for example the withdrawal of food as punishment for bad behaviour or persistent failure to clothe and feed a foster child adequately.

There is no doubt that many difficulties experienced by children within the care system can be resolved by meeting with the child and carer(s) and relevant professionals to identify areas of disagreement and conflict, and to plan for their resolution.

Responding to complaints and grievances in relation to children in foster care

All Tusla areas are required under the National Standards for Foster Care to have a complaints system for children in care in place and ensure children in care are aware of same.

Responding to allegations of abuse and neglect in relation to children in foster care

All allegations, disclosures and reports of child abuse and neglect should be

dealt with under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children, 2017 and each report should generate an 'Intake Form' to formally record the start of the assessment process.

It is important that the child's social worker supports the child through the process, ensuring the child knows he or she has been heard and that action has been taken to stop the incident or concern from happening again.

When an allegation of abuse or neglect or suspected abuse or neglect is raised Tusla carries out an assessment of possible risk to all children in the foster placement including the carer's own children. This assessment informs the decision whether to maintain the placement.

Facing an allegation or complaint is very difficult for a carer and the process can be very stressful. Carers need support throughout this process.

- Reports will be treated with the utmost regard to confidentiality
- The Fostering Link Social Worker will keep the carer updated as to the progress of the assessment and may be involved in aspects of the assessment process
- Foster Carers will be treated with respect and dignity throughout the process
- Carers will be offered support and informed of the existence (if not already known) of the Irish Foster Care Association and given the name of the local representative whom they can contact for support and advice.

Tusla should provide foster carers with a copy of the operational policy guiding the social workers conducting the investigation. This will also assist foster carers to understand the process, to know what to expect, and facilitate communication between all parties. IFCA encourages all foster carers facing allegations to avail of further information, individual support and advocacy if necessary through its National Helpline and Advocacy Service.

Foster carers should also be given information about Tusla's complaints procedure 'Tell Us' which has a formal process for receiving complaints and dealing with appeals.

The Irish Foster Care Association

IFCA's Mission

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, learning and advocacy. Membership is broad based and includes foster and relative carers, social workers, child care workers, academics and others with an interest in or who are involved in foster care.

IFCA's Vision

A society where the importance of fostering is recognised, valued and supported. Where every child can grow up in a safe and caring family.

IFCA Values

- The rights of the child
- The role of the family in a child's life
- Respect, compassion and kindness
- Effective partnerships and open communication
- Innovation and research.

IFCA Believes

- That foster care is complex and foster carers require a range of supports and expert advice to enable them to provide the best possible care for the child in their care
- In the value of foster care as an effective alternative for children who, for various reasons, are unable to live with their own families.

What We Do

As the national organisation for foster care, IFCA works to influence policy, legislation and opinion through its advocacy work. IFCA contributes to consultations on key issues with policy submissions reflecting the views and experiences of members. IFCA also liaises with Tusla – Child and Family Agency,

the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and other stakeholders regularly, to communicate issues and experiences of members and propose positive solutions to inform best practice in foster care in Ireland.

IFCA is a valuable source of information for all in foster care. We communicate with members through IFCA's newsletter, Ezine, website and social media. Members are kept up to date on our work, developments in foster care and learning opportunities available to them.

IFCA provides booklets and information sessions on topics relevant to foster care and organises information sessions for all involved in foster care at a local level.

IFCA holds an annual awareness campaign 'Fostering Fortnight' to celebrate foster care in Ireland. A variety of events, talks and information sessions are held over two weeks in February or March each year.

National Helpline Service

IFCA offers a National Helpline Service to our members and all those with a query or question about fostering. The service is designed to assist all foster carers experiencing difficulty by:

- Providing an objective, non-judgemental, and supportive environment in which to discuss and explore issues of concern
- Providing balanced, good quality advice and information regarding all aspects of foster care
- Facilitating improved communication and dialogue between all concerned
- Assisting foster carers in identifying constructive strategies for resolving their concerns
- Supporting carer confidence in working towards positive solutions.

IFCA's National Helpline is available 5 days a week from 11am to 3pm.

Telephone Helpline: (01) 458 51 23

support@ifca.ie

National Advocacy Service

At IFCA we understand that you may need support to carry out your foster caring role. We believe that situations such as allegations, communication breakdowns and placement disruptions require additional support, guidance and sensitivity. Our dedicated team of advocacy workers will work with you to ensure that you feel acknowledged, understood and supported to respond in difficult situations. We will also if necessary direct you to resources relevant to your situation. Our approach is based on collaboration, communication and encouragement, above all we will focus on promoting your ability to advocate for yourself.

Learning and Development

IFCA aims to build a learning community so that those with an interest in foster care can learn together, engage in dialogue, share experiences and develop the quality of fostering practice. We offer members:

- Two issues every year of Foster, IFCA's journal on developments in foster care practice, policy and research
- A national, annual conference with separate programmes for adults, children and young people – with reduced rates for members
- A range of workshops and information sessions available regionally
- A knowledge bank on the IFCA website on issues of relevance to foster care.

Foster Care Hubs and Branches

IFCA offers support to its members around the country through its Foster Care Hubs and Branches; providing information, peer support and learning opportunities. Volunteers play a key role in the planning and organisation of a wide variety of activities in their locality; from social events and information sessions, to workshops and courses.

Becoming an active member in your locality can provide you with an opportunity to:

- Meet local foster carers and people with an interest in foster care in your area
- Discuss issues relating to foster care and receive advice on where to seek further assistance

- Access peer support, with a trained peer support volunteer, which can range from formal support groups to informal coffee mornings
- Have your voice heard at local and national level within IFCA and, through IFCA, with the relevant decision makers in foster care
- Receive information on current developments in fostering and IFCA's role in advocating and campaigning for change
- Receive information on IFCA's services, upcoming local/national seminars and training, learning and social events
- Attend IFCA's Regional Gatherings which offer an opportunity to meet with IFCA staff and Board Members and have your voice heard.

The Benefits of Joining IFCA

The first year of membership is free for all new family and individual members. IFCA has different levels of support and membership.

Individual/Family Membership entitles you to:

- Access to our Legal Expenses Insurance Cover
- AGM voting rights
- Information and guidance on foster care
- Learning Opportunities
- Access to IFCA's National Helpline and Advocacy Service
- Reduced rates for Annual Seminars and Conferences
- Access to Hubs and Branches
- Membership Discounts
- Dedicated Membership Manager
- Two Fostering Journals published by IFCA via email or post on request
- Regular IFCA updates via our members-only Ezine.

To Become a Member

Contact the IFCA office on Tel: **01 459 9474** or visit **www.ifca.ie**

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