



# Guidance on resolving issues in fostering

**Irish  
Foster Care  
Association**

# Guidance on resolving issues in fostering

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# Resolving issues in fostering

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This booklet outlines the various routes available for foster carers in attempting to resolve issues and problems which may arise for them within the framework of fostering children. It begins by looking at the variety of challenges inherent in fostering while providing brief insights into the research on these issues.

## Introduction

Given the variety of difficulties often experienced by children in care, fostering is viewed as a particularly complex task which foster carers are unlikely to carry out successfully without support (Lindsey, 2000). Additional difficulties that may occur relate to parental roles and relative care, parent-child contact and access, permanency of placements, day-to-day decision-making, and the ongoing assessment and treatment of a child's developmental and mental health needs.

The more changes in caregivers that young children in foster care experience, the more they may express their feelings through a range of behaviours, such as oppositional behaviour, crying, and/or 'clinging' (Gean, Gillmore, and Dowler, 1985). Such behavioural and emotional difficulties may in turn lead to further disruptions in care as children's behavioural and emotional difficulties are among the major reasons for disruption of a foster care placement (Oosterman et al, 2007).

The demands and stresses placed on carers themselves are often significant. Ottoway and Selwyn (2016) cite the severity of these effects, which often have a negative impact on the quality of care provided to children, the stability and continuity of placements, foster carers' mental and physical well-being, and foster carer retention. Family life is also found to be tested to the limits on occasions, with considerable stress being placed on couples' relationships, and the well-being of other children in the household can also be affected.

*“ Without support, carers may risk continuing to feel judged and blamed for their own difficulties, and those of the children they care for, with the consequence of problems remaining unresolved and the needs of both children in care and their carers continuing to go unmet.”*

It is vital to create a safe space for carers to process the child's and their own difficulties, or to discuss complex and upsetting issues without the threat of judgement or reprimand. Such a safe space is needed and can be provided through support groups, support helplines, informal peer support and, very importantly, through the supervision and support received from relevant professionals. Without support, carers may risk continuing to feel judged and blamed for their own difficulties, and those of the children they care for, with the consequence of problems remaining unresolved and the needs of both children in care and their carers continuing to go unmet.

## The Irish Foster Care Association support helpline

IFCA provides a telephone helpline from Monday to Friday between 11:00 and 15:00. The helpline operates from the IFCA office in Tallaght, providing a first point of contact to foster carers and all those with a query or question about fostering. The telephone helpline can provide practical information and advice regarding any aspect of fostering as well as a supportive listening ear.

It is appropriate to note that when a foster carer contacts IFCA's support helpline, in most cases it is because they are experiencing a difficulty with some aspect of providing foster care. Many foster carers report very good working relationships with their link worker or children's social worker and, where this is the case, the outcomes appear to be mainly positive for all involved. It is evident that for carers, where communication with a social worker remains a problem, this is not conducive to constructive working relationships or resolving issues that may arise.

Further details on the support service review can be accessed by IFCA members at [www.ifca.ie](http://www.ifca.ie). (Membership of IFCA is free for the first year,

please visit the website for details on how to become a member.)

### **IFCA support helpline**

Call: (01) 458 5123 Monday to Friday, 11.00-15.00

Email: [support@ifca.ie](mailto:support@ifca.ie)

## **Support from social workers**

Research by Beecham and Sinclair (2007) and Sinclair et al (2005), found that foster carers were more satisfied when in receipt of regular visits from their allocated social worker and when the child in their care had been allocated a social worker. This particular aspect of support is cited as key to placement stability and positive fostering experiences. Other research that supports such findings includes Triseliotis (1989) and Sinclair et al (2004), who reported that foster carers needed regular contact with social workers, and opportunities for respite and the resolution of fostering issues.

## **The role of the fostering link worker**

The following description outlines the role of the fostering link worker:





'The role of the link worker is to ensure that foster carers and relative carers have access to the information, advice and professional support necessary to enable them to provide high-quality care to the child or children placed with them. The role involves a range of duties, including supervision, support and training of carers. Link workers provide carers with support and supervision through visits and telephone contact on a frequent basis, especially at times of new placements. Link workers also have a responsibility to ensure that foster carers understand, accept and operate within all relevant standards, policies and guidance of the Child and Family Agency' (Tusla, 2015: 40).

Research has shown that 'good support and supervision of foster carers is likely to result in their feeling satisfied and staying on' (Selick, 2006:72). Foster carers often place high value on the support of their fostering link worker. However, when support is not forthcoming, the impact on the foster carer is significant and it can influence how carers further engage with social work services (Kirton et al, 2007).

## Resolving issues

Within everyday fostering experiences, a foster carer may identify a specific need or difficulty relating to the children in their care or within the context of the entire family. This should be discussed first with the relevant social workers or can be brought up at the statutory reviews of either the child in care or of the foster carers themselves. (Articles on statutory reviews are available in IFCA Journal issues 5 and 6.) In many

instances a plan is put in place to meet the expressed need. Difficulties often arise when the child's social worker does not, or cannot, agree with the foster carer's definition of the need or in situations where funding is not approved, resources are not available, and so on, and the problem or issue remains in place.

*“ Given the number of adults that are often involved in the life of a child in care, the primary focus should always be on building co-operation and proactive solution-finding ”*

It is accepted best practice that all involved adults should be working in the child's best interest, with the safety and well-being of the child being given paramount importance. However, as in all relationships, differences in emphasis, timing and perceptions of priorities can and will occur and disagreements may arise with the potential for ongoing escalation. The initial approach recommended by IFCA to resolving issues is for all involved to try to understand the other parties' positions, and to look at ways of reaching a compromise (as long as this does not compromise the safety and well-being of the child involved). As in all communications, efforts should be made to remain respectful and attempts made not to personalise issues. Given the number of adults that are often involved in the life of a child in care, the primary focus should always be on building co-operation and proactive solution-finding.

Where the disagreement or ongoing issue is with the child's social worker, IFCA recommends the following steps:

- In consultation with the fostering link worker, the carer should ensure that the team leader of the child's social worker has heard the foster carer's position. If the team leader disagrees, then you may ask for, in writing, the rationale for the position of the child's social worker's team. In some instances, this may not be given, and if so, you should make a note of this.
- If the foster carer is still not satisfied, it may then be appropriate to write to the principal social worker of the child's social worker team. In most cases this can be done by, or with, the fostering link worker.

- If no resolution occurs, the next step is to write to the area manager. This can be done individually by the carer, but may have more likelihood of achieving a resolution if there is clear support from other social workers within the fostering team. Where the area manager supports the position of the child's social work team, then the foster carer (or whoever else is raising the issue) will need to reconsider their next course of action.
- Each of the four Tusla regional fostering areas has an allocated service director. Contact details of all associated teams can be found on the Tusla website ([www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)). Communicating difficulties to the level of a service director is usually only appropriate when all previous communication has not yielded a result or has yielded one that is not accepted or considered appropriate by the carer.

If the difficulty exists with the link worker themselves, the route is the same. If initial attempts to resolve the issue at a one-to-one level do not work, foster carers should communicate with the link worker's team leader. If this does not yield a solution, foster carers should approach the principal social worker and area manager in turn or at the same time.

## Recording your communication about your concerns

Many carers who contact IFCA's support helpline detail ongoing difficulties relating to the inconsistency and unreliability of communication routes to raise issues. Many state that they need to phone or email or write several times in order to get a response.

- It is important for foster carers to receive decisions made about the child or themselves in writing and foster carers should always request this.
- This is of great importance where investigations into allegations are concerned, which can be the source of a great deal of distress for those involved. IFCA continues to recommend to all involved in fostering to maintain appropriate records and to ensure that all important developments relating to their roles and the welfare of the children in their care are recorded in writing.



“ *Agreement on the methods of appropriate communication between carers and social workers is an important part of the relationship that holds the child at the centre* ”

As part of IFCA’s ongoing approach to the management and resolution of issues within fostering, we continually advise all those involved to ensure that they record their concerns/issues/progress in writing. This may often take the form of a written letter but many individuals prefer to correspond by email. Within the various Tusla areas there are varying approaches and opinions regarding the use of email as a communication medium.

## The ‘Tell Us’ service

IFCA recommends that the previous sequence of steps is followed, with issues being presented up the line to the most senior level when necessary, that is:

- to the principal social worker,
- followed by area manager and/or service director.

This can yield mutually beneficial results which serve to meet the needs of the child in question and demonstrate the outcomes that can be achieved when all associated adults work in a collaborative and respectful fashion. However, foster carers also have the right to make an official complaint through Tusla’s complaint service, ‘Tell Us’. This would be the next step, if communication with the service director had proven unsatisfactory.



Details of the service can be found at: [www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications](http://www.tusla.ie/about/feedback-and-complaints/tell-us-publications)

Call (01) 771 8500

Text: 086 0142775

Email: [tellus@tusla.ie](mailto:tellus@tusla.ie)

‘Tell Us’ also provides access to a National Specialist in Accessibility who is available to provide guidance, advice and strategic support in the promotion of access for people with disabilities.

A complaints officer will look into the complaint you’ve submitted through ‘Tell Us’ within 30 working days of the date when it was acknowledged. If it takes longer to look into all the issues raised, the complaints officer will notify you within 30 working days and will provide an update on what is happening every 20 working days after that. Your complaint will be always be allocated to a specific complaints officer.

It is the duty of the complaints officer to notify the ‘Tell Us’ service if they have been allocated a complaint regarding a situation they themselves have been actively involved in.

As the complainant, you will be told who is handling your complaint. If it is a person who has previously been involved with you in respect of your complaint, you are free to make an objection if you feel there is a conflict of interest. The policy relating to management of this service clearly states,

“Making a complaint will in no way adversely affect the service an individual receives from Tusla” (Tusla, 2016:7).

## Mediation

Another avenue that may be considered for the resolution of issues is that of mediation. Mediation is a voluntary confidential process that allows two or more disputing parties resolve their conflict in a mutually agreeable way with the help of a neutral third party – the mediator (Ernst and Stein, 1997).

The type of mediation process will vary, depending on the type of dispute. An agreement to mediate should be signed at the outset and the mediator will then meet the parties together and/or separately, over the course of one day or in sessions over a number of days or weeks. Solicitors or other advisors may attend mediation sessions if required and appropriate. If agreement is reached this will be recorded and signed at the mediation, and further steps taken to enforce and enact the agreed resolutions.

Giving due consideration to this process may increase the likelihood of a resolution but it is dependent on both parties being amenable to the process. At the very least, a willingness to enter mediation displays a willingness to work together to achieve outcomes agreeable to all involved. It is important that the credentials of the mediator are established and that the neutrality of the professional involved is confirmed.

The Mediator’s Institute of Ireland can provide information on the process, and guidance on sourcing an appropriately accredited mediator.

[www.themii.ie](http://www.themii.ie)  
Call (01) 609 9190  
Email: [info@themii.ie](mailto:info@themii.ie)

## Ombudsman services

If the outcome arrived at by following the previous routes detailed is not the desired one, or the complainant feels their complaint has not been dealt with appropriately, the role of the Ombudsman or Ombudsman for Children can be considered.

There are two ombudsman services, the Ombudsman for Children's Office and the Office of the Ombudsman. The details of both services are outlined below.

## Ombudsman for Children

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) exists to ensure that the government and other people who make decisions about children consider what is best for them. The Ombudsman for Children's Office can address the perceived failure of an organisation to provide adequate care or services relating to education, psychological assessment, safety and well-being, etc, for the child in question. If you need information about making a complaint or information about an ongoing complaint you can call the complaints freephone number and one of the OCO's caseworkers will assist further in preliminary enquiries.

### **Ombudsman for Children's Office**

Millennium House,

52-56 Great Strand Street, Dublin 1.

Complaints freephone number: 1800 20 20 40

OCO complaints team email: [ococomplaint@oco.ie](mailto:ococomplaint@oco.ie)

General email: [oco@oco.ie](mailto:oco@oco.ie)

## Ombudsman

The Office of the Ombudsman examines complaints from people who feel they have been unfairly treated by certain public bodies, for example: government departments, local authorities, the HSE, Tusla and publicly-funded third level education bodies. They provide a free public service which is open and accountable. Their role is to examine complaints in a

fair and impartial way. Anyone can make a complaint to the Ombudsman. You can complain on your own behalf or for someone else if they ask you to. You can make a complaint as an individual or as a public representative and as a business or organisation. You should complain to the Ombudsman as soon as possible and not later than 12 months after the action you want to complain about occurred, or you became aware of it occurring. For further information please see the article included in the IFCA Journal 4 about the work of the Ombudsman's Office.

There is a memorandum of understanding between the Office of the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children. There may be communication between both offices to decide which is the most suitable for handling the complaint. When an issue is viewed as having affected both the adults and the children, then it is possible that each office may run their own examination at the same time. Both offices will check to see that you have sought to resolve the issue locally first.

#### **Office of the Ombudsman**

18 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin 2.

Phone: (01) 639 5600

Lo-call: 1890 22 30 30

Email: [ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.ie](mailto:ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.ie)

## **CORU**

CORU is Ireland's multi-profession health regulator, whose role is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct, education, training and competence through statutory registration of health and social care professionals. The body was set up under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (as amended). It provides regulation and registration for a number of professions, including social care workers and social workers. Its range of services include:

- Maintaining and publishing a register of health and social care professionals who meet CORU's Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics

- Ensuring that registered professionals keep their skills up to date by promoting continuing professional development
- Running ‘Fitness to Practise’ hearings into the conduct and competence of registered members.

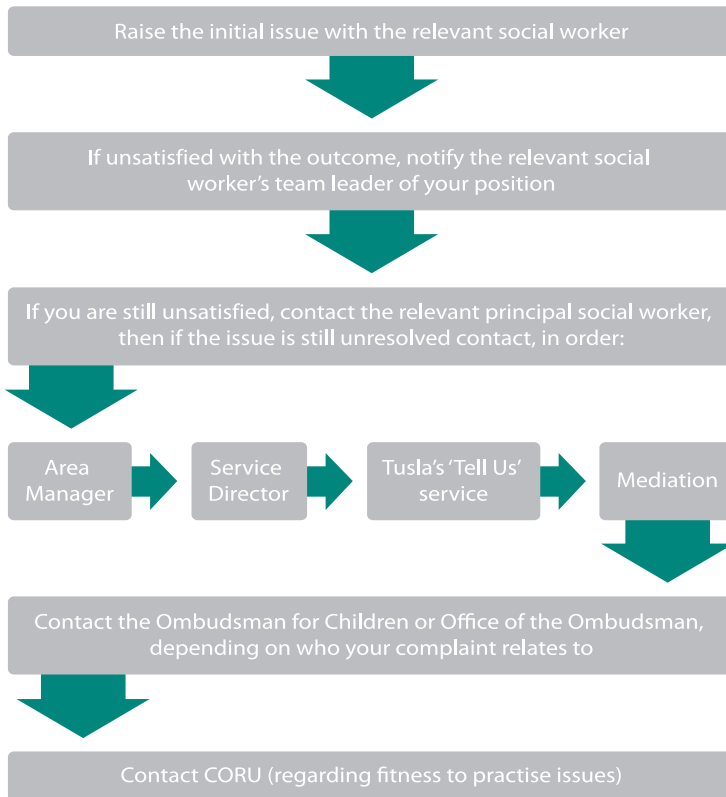
‘Fitness to Practise’ involves issues that affect an individual’s ability to practise in their profession, not just within their current role. This includes professional misconduct and poor professional performance. Fitness to Practise does not replace employers’ complaints or disciplinary procedures. CORU’s Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics, for each profession covered, sets out the standards of conduct, performance and ethics which apply to all registered health and social care professionals. It is against these standards that any individual will be measured in any Fitness to Practise complaint.

CORU will only take action where the incidents complained of are of a serious nature and raise a concern about the registrant’s ability to practise his or her profession. CORU’s goal is to take action where necessary to protect service users, patients, and the public interest. Before making a complaint to CORU you may wish to consider whether you have tried all of the previous suggested steps, as explained earlier in this article.

A complaint can be made by anyone in respect of a health and social care professional who is registered with CORU. All complaints are dealt with by a Complaints Committee and CORU stress the importance of receiving details of your complaint in your own words. As a result, all complaints can only be accepted in writing on their complaints form.

Email: [ftp@coru.ie](mailto:ftp@coru.ie) [info@coru.ie](mailto:info@coru.ie)  
Phone: (01) 293 3160  
(Mon-Fri, 10:00-13:00)

### *Summary of steps recommended by IFCA in resolving an issue, in order*



Remember, at each stage, to record in writing and keep copies of all your communication with these agencies, and anything else relating to your concerns.

## Conclusion

As a foster carer, you are both a service user and service provider. As such, honest, respectful and courteous communication which recognises the professional partnerships that exist in the delivery and management of these services needs to be evident in practice. This, along with an adherence to appropriate practice regarding the resolution of difficult issues and appropriate solution-seeking, can go a long way towards ensuring the best interests of children in care.

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