

The background of the cover is a full-page image of a family (two adults and three children) running happily on a path through a wooded area. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. In the center, there is a white rectangular box with a hand-drawn, slightly irregular border containing the title text.

Strategic Plan 2025 – 2027



INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Board and Management Team of IFCA, we are delighted to present our new strategy which sets out our priorities as an organisation for the next three years. This strategy has been developed in consultation with almost 600 individuals – foster carers, our members, our employees, our Board, Tusla personnel in addition to key stakeholders all of whom we will work collaboratively with in the coming years to work towards our vision where **fostering is recognised, valued and supported** for improved outcomes for the over 5,500 children and young people who live in foster care in Ireland.

As a representative organisation we have an important function to campaign, lobby and advocate on behalf of foster carers and the wider foster care community. As a statutory funded organisation, our role as the independent voice of foster care is underpinned in the joint principles to both the Statutory sector and the Community and Voluntary sector to “recognise their mutual right to critique each other’s actions and policies”¹. We work collaboratively with our core funder, Tusla – Child and Family Agency to seek accountability for the implementation of national policies, whilst also being accountable for the work we are funded to do.

Throughout this process we reflected on where we could improve our representation of the voice of foster care and received extensive input into the best way to engage not just with members of IFCA but also all foster carers, who are committed to children in the care of the State. We used an external consultant to objectively listen and engage with our stakeholders over months of consultations. The key priorities that were identified for IFCA’s work were:

1. To **influence** change in policy and practice to ensure fostering is recognised, valued and supported.
2. To provide and access responsive, solution focused and agile **supports and services** to our membership.
3. To enhance our **Organisational Capacity**, Sustainability and Governance.

Our focus in the coming three years will be to maximise the ways in which we hear from the foster care community to inform our advocacy agenda and progress specific issues relating to financial supports, including pensions; ensure consistent access to services and supports for foster carers and the children who they care for; and to ensure that the recruitment and retention of foster carers is supported to ensure that every child in care can grow up in a safe and caring family.

We would like to thank our Board members who dedicate their time and expertise to IFCA on a voluntary basis, providing governance and strategic direction. Also, to the members of the foster care sub-committee, the staff, volunteers and external stakeholders who supported the development of this plan. Thank you to the members and foster carers throughout the country whose passion and commitment for foster care was evident throughout the strategic planning process. The incredible difference you make every day to the lives of children for whom you care has informed this plan.

Finally, we would like to thank Tusla – Child and Family Agency, the Department of Children, Equality, Integration, Disability and Youth, and Pobal for the support of IFCA’s work to achieve our shared goals.

Raymond Nolan
Chairperson

Corrinne Hasson
CEO

¹ White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector (2000).



OUR VISION, MISSION, VALUES

OUR VISION

Fostering is recognised, valued and supported.

OUR MISSION

IFCA is the voice for foster care in Ireland. We promote and strengthen foster care through the provision of supports and by advocating for the progressive reform of policy and practice.

OUR VALUES

We value *solidarity*, acting in unity and consensus as the voice of foster care in Ireland.

Respect for and inclusion of all members of the fostering community is core to our work.

We work in *collaboration* with all our stakeholders to achieve our shared goals of recognising, valuing and supporting foster care.

We act with *integrity*, communicating honestly and being accountable as the voice of foster care in Ireland.



WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The Irish Foster Care Association is the national organisation that supports foster families and the wider fostering community. Established in 1981 by a group of foster carers and social workers our primary objective as an organisation is to promote excellence in foster care by:

- Promoting partnership between everyone involved in foster care to work for, and in the best interests of the child in care.
- Providing support and learning opportunities for persons involved in foster care in Ireland.
- Creating a greater public awareness of and promoting foster care in Ireland.
- Advocating for excellence for all involved in foster care.

Representing our members is core to IFCA's work, however, this work has broader benefits for the wider foster care community, identifying challenging and complex issues that may arise on the fostering journey. Once identified, we represent the foster care community to support and advocate for positive change. We embrace, value and respect diversity in our membership as essential in supporting strong working relationships amongst all those involved in foster care.

ADVOCACY – POLICY AND PRACTICE

We work as the collective voice for foster care, advocating and working collaboratively with decision makers, government, statutory agencies and sectoral stakeholders. We work to ensure that foster carers are valued, informed, supported, and empowered to support the children and young people in their care. To do so we work closely with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Tusla – Child and Family Agency, other Government Departments and HIQA to contribute to policy development in foster care. We then independently monitor the impact of policy and practice through engagement with foster carers.

The issues impacting foster care are diverse, and straddle several areas of legislation, policy and government departments. This is reflected in IFCA's work and remit as a national organisation. We strive to consistently improve the foster care system in Ireland. To achieve this, we must not only demonstrate how our work aligns with policy frameworks but also track our own outcomes to ensure they remain relevant and deliver meaningful impact.

“IFCA are our voice with the Government” Foster Carer.

NATIONAL HELPLINE

IFCA's Helpline Service is the first point of contact within IFCA for foster carers and all those with a query or question about fostering. The National Helpline is managed by trained and certified staff and volunteers, providing a telephone, email and webchat service from Monday – Friday 11am – 3pm. It provides an objective, non-judgemental and supportive environment to discuss and explore issues of concern relating to foster care and manages nearly 600 calls per year. It provides balanced, good-quality advice and information regarding all aspects of foster care.



The Helpline provides the channel into the Advocacy Team for members of IFCA should there be a need for additional individual support.

“We have had excellent support from IFCA over the years, the phone is always answered, the staff genuinely care” Foster Carer.

NATIONAL ADVOCACY SERVICE

IFCA provides independent support and advocacy for foster families. Our advocates prepare and support foster families at statutory meetings, including foster care and child in care reviews, the allegations assessment process in addition to meetings related to birth family visits and communication with social work teams.

IFCA's advocacy service offers a personalised and flexible service to all the individuals involved, with a combination of emotional and practical supports.

“When I needed help, someone was there for me within days” Foster Carer.

NATIONAL COUNSELLING SERVICE

IFCA recognises the need to support foster carers who have had the experience of an allegation of abuse or complaints made against them, who have been involved in complex fostering experiences or who have found that the experience of fostering has placed stress on them in their lives. The National Counselling Service provides foster families with a compassionate, non-judgemental and confidential environment where they can explore their thoughts and feelings about challenging situations that the fostering experience has placed upon them. Carers are offered up to six free counselling sessions to develop the foster carer's capacity to become more resourceful, empowered and resilient to resolve conflicts.

“I had support when I needed it” Foster Carer.

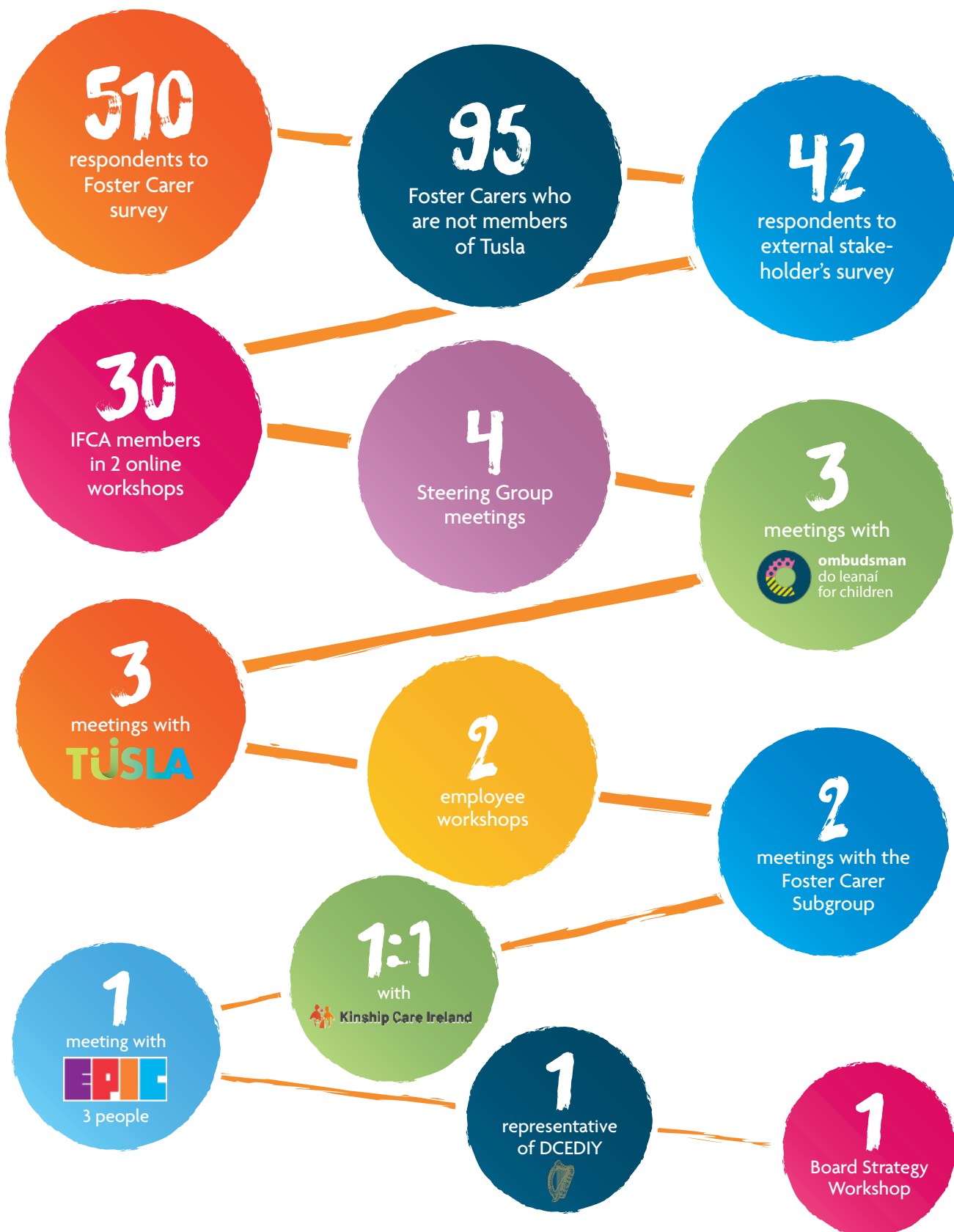
LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

IFCA offers opportunities for learning and development to foster carers and fostering practitioners with the aim of building the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of children in care with confidence. Along with IFCA's annual national conference, training and learning events, whether face-to-face or online, we support members of the fostering community to progress their ongoing learning and development and also avail of the support that comes from meeting peers and colleagues at such events. In addition, a range of resources and information supports are developed to support and inform all those involved in foster care including IFCA's Journal Foster, and the award-winning podcast, Stories from Foster Care.

“Learning and Development is Five Star. Training is excellent” Foster Carer.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

The process included consultations with:





KEY ISSUES & THEMES

During the consultations, feedback was sought on what is working well and what could be done differently in addition to the focus for IFCA for the next three years. Extensive feedback was received and summarised into key themes.

THEME 1: Informing the advocacy agenda through direct input from foster carers

Whilst some respondents identified communication from IFCA as a strength, the need to effectively communicate the existence and the benefits of membership of IFCA, particularly for foster carers, were identified. For those foster carers who are not members of IFCA, the lack of knowledge in relation to the role of IFCA and the services the organisation provides were the issues most prevalent in responses.

Whilst some noted the loss of local peer support networks in recent years, it was highlighted that it is a key role of Tusla and the Private Foster Agencies to provide this. It was identified that the main role of IFCA therefore is to engage with foster carers and identify where this is not in place, and advocate for the development of these supportive networks. It is noted that IFCA could provide a low level of peer support to close the gap, where needed. This should be explored in a way that meets the need of foster carers, and in line with IFCA's limited resources.

Through this process, specific areas for focus at a national policy level were identified particularly that of financial support reflecting the vision of “valuing foster care”. The need to advocate with the Department of Social Protection in respect of Pension Rights and uniform application of policy nationally were issues highlighted.

“We are calling on Government to finally address pensions for foster carers and implement a solution that ensures time spent providing care for children in state care is recognised and foster carers are not faced with financial disadvantage in later life as a result of their contribution to the State” IFCA Pre Budget Submission 2025.

THEME 2: Strengthening the voice of foster care

The need to expand the membership of IFCA to strengthen its position as the voice of foster care was identified in addition to developing the ways in which IFCA engages with all foster carers and the wider fostering community to identify key issues and challenges presented to influence the policy agenda.

A recurring theme was that all foster carers should be members of IFCA. The reasons identified for those foster carers who are not members was the fact that many “never got around to joining”. A need for IFCA to raise awareness and engage with all foster carers was identified as an opportunity to support the increase in membership.

“Be our voice”.



THEME 3: Focusing on advocacy for foster families

As an organisation with limited resources, it was noted that a weakness has been trying to spread those resources too thinly. As a representative organisation, the strong view was that IFCA should focus its resources to be the voice of foster care in the coming years.

The National Advocacy Service which provides personalised supports to foster families was described as the “jewel in the crown” providing an invaluable service and support to foster families in complex and challenging circumstances.

“The support and advice were exceptional” Foster Carer.

THEME 4: Learning & development

Through the consultations, it was identified that a significant number of foster carers find online training events as well as in person training events particularly beneficial, with many having a preference for online training. In addition, an overwhelming preference for a one day conference (rather than the current weekend conference) focused on education, information and foster community engagement was identified. The need to have consistent access to training events across the country was noted.

In relation to the annual national conference there was strong preference for single day events but also some requests to hold more events online due to challenges attending in person. It was identified that there is a benefit in having an event based on the wider foster family and one that focused on education, information and foster community engagement.

Opportunities in the coming years to work with universities and research agencies such as the ESRI to commission and use research for policy lobbying and advocacy for better experiences and outcomes for children in foster care in Ireland and to inform evidence-based learning were identified.

“The training provided has been of a very good standard. I used several sessions, and all were hosted by excellent people” Foster Carer.

THEME 5: Developing strategic partnerships to achieve common goals

To achieve its goals, the need for IFCA to collaborate and pool resources with other organisations with common goals was identified. Developing strategic partnerships emerged as a key priority.

“IFCA have a challenging role to lead and represent foster carers but also to champion joint work with all partners involved in fostering” Foster Carer.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

In the review of key themes, three key strategic priorities were identified for focus in the next three years. Below each of these strategic priorities, is a comprehensive set of goals and strategic actions, that incorporate the key themes and will inform our annual operational plan to deliver this strategy.

These three strategic priorities are:

1. INFLUENCE – we will influence change in policy and practice to ensure fostering is recognised, valued and supported.

2. SUPPORT & SERVICES – we will provide and ensure access to responsive, solution focused and agile supports and services for our membership.

3. ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY – we will enhance our organisational capacity, sustainability and governance to deliver this strategy.

In each of these ensuring we have a consistent focus on being informed by our members and the foster care community.

Strategic Priority 1: INFLUENCE	
Influence change in policy and practice to ensure fostering in Ireland is recognised, valued and supported	
GOAL	WE WILL DO THIS BY
Improved outcomes for children in foster care and increased sustainability of foster care in Ireland.	- Advocating and working collaboratively with decision makers, government, Tusla and other statutory bodies, and sectoral fora. - Ensuring that foster carers are valued, informed, supported, appropriately resourced and empowered to support the children and young people in their care. - Raising public and political awareness of foster care. - Evidencing the impact of this work.
Our national advocacy agenda is informed by the foster care community.	- Maximising our engagement with all foster carers through a variety of forums and opportunities (face to face; online; hybrid). - Developing a culture of proactive engagement, listening and response. - Engaging with key stakeholders working with foster carers to inform and validate our advocacy agenda.
A strong collective voice for foster care.	- Informing our policy agenda through wider consultations with key stakeholders. - Using data to identify gaps and needs geographically and nationally to identify key advocacy issues. - Maximising our reach and impact to represent the foster care community. - Developing strategic partnerships to work towards common goals.
Strategic partnerships deliver innovative research, capacity building and learning opportunities and programmes, connected with policy to strengthen and support foster care and the fostering community.	- Identifying, commissioning and supporting research that aligns with and informs national strategy for improved outcomes and approaches throughout the foster care community. - Developing academic and sectoral partnerships, including All Island and EU stakeholders to develop research consortia opportunities.



Strategic Priority 2: SUPPORTS & SERVICES	
Provide and access responsive, solution-focused and agile supports and services to our membership	
GOAL	WE WILL DO THIS BY
Foster carers are provided with independent expert advocacy.	• Extending our individual advocacy services to support child-centred and family focused outcomes and contributing to the retention of foster carers. • Seeking additional resources to support the Helpline and Advocacy function. • Developing the provision of support and information for foster carers to understand Child Care Proceedings and how court decisions may impact on a child's placement.
The foster care community has access to expert, independent and informed advice and guidance.	• Mapping and develop links with sectoral partners to enhance services and signposting. • Advocating for the provision of appropriate supports and services in areas where gaps exist.
Learning and development that is relevant, impactful, accessible and informed by best practice.	• Delivering our evidence-based training and development through a variety of forums (in person, online, hybrid). • Collaborating with sectoral partners to map existing training opportunities and respond in the absence of available training opportunities. • Delivering information and learning through our literature and promoting our podcast series.
Foster carers access supports and services across the country in a consistent manner.	• Establishing relationships with sectoral partners and to inform and develop signposting pathways to community resources and programmes to support foster carers and their families and enhance services. • Identifying gaps in geographical areas of supports and services and advocate for the development of same. • Advocating for equitable and accessible supports and services for foster families. • Advocating for consistent experience for supports, financial entitlements and, communication and child and family focused decision making.
Every foster carer is a member of IFCA.	• Strengthen the benefits of membership of IFCA. • Promoting and communicating the benefits of IFCA membership to all foster carers. • Developing our relationship with Tusla and relevant stakeholders to inform foster carers to encourage membership of IFCA. • Increasing our membership to represent the foster care community.



Strategic Priority 3: ORGANISATIONAL	
Enhance our Organisational Capacity, Sustainability and Governance	
GOAL	WE WILL DO THIS BY
Our staff are resourced, supported and empowered to work in a positive, mission led organisation.	- Investing in our staff support and professional development. - Ensuring that all staff are aligned to the vision, mission and values of IFCA. - Participating in sectoral fora to advocate for pay parity in the Community and Voluntary sector.
An organisational infrastructure, values led culture and practices which support the delivery of this strategy.	- Ensuring our services are optimally supported to meet the needs of the foster care community. - Ensuring that operational processes are streamlined to ensure resources and capacity are in line with the delivery of our goals
Highest standards of governance, financial management and transparency are met and embedded in IFCA	- Adhering to all legislative, sectoral and regulatory obligations. - Continued compliance with requirements of all service level agreements. - A strong, diverse Board and subcommittee framework that supports our legal and strategic obligations.
IFCA has diverse sustainable funding streams to support our work.	- Additional sources of funding are secured to support our work and increase capacity to deliver supports and services to members, new projects, programmes and organisational outputs. - New and existing funder relationships are developed to support sustainable core funding.
Fostering is valued as a core pillar of Irish society.	- Develop a comprehensive, responsive and engaging communications strategy. - Work in partnership with Tusla and other key stakeholders to promote the value of foster care and support the recruitment and retention of foster carers.



POLICY CONTEXT

The following National and International documents inform our work.

1. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
2. UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children
3. Programme for Government
4. DCEDIY Statement of Strategy 2023 – 2025
5. Young Ireland National Policy Framework 2023 – 2028
6. Strategic Plan for Residential Care Services for Children and Young People 2022 – 2025
7. Strategic Plan for Foster Care Services for Children and Young People 2022 – 2025
8. UNCRPD (Ref. Ireland's State Report in UNCRPD Joint Protocol for Inter-Agency collaboration between the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Tusla)
9. Department of Education Statement of Strategy 2023 – 2025
10. Strategic Plan for Aftercare Services for Young People and Young Adults 2023 – 2026
11. Department of Justice, Family Justice Strategy 2023 – 2025
12. National Standards for Foster Care*

** The National Standards for Foster Care 2003 are based on the relevant legislation, regulation, guidance and best practice derived from evidence-based research and is the core guiding document for foster care services in Ireland. Adherence to the Standards is implied throughout our deliverables. The National Standards are currently under review and will be applied when published.*

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**Community
Foundation
Ireland**

2into3
Transforming Social Impact

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