

**TÚSLA**  
An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

  
Irish Foster Care Association

*The*  
**ATLANTIC**  
*Philanthropies*

*National Consultations*  
*Fostering Services*  
*Summary Interim Report*

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## Introduction

Foster Care is the backbone of the care system in Ireland with 93% of children placed in care currently living with foster carers. A significant number of foster carers are represented by the Irish Foster Care Association. In developing an Alternative Care Strategy, Tusla recognised that it was essential to hear the voices of foster carers, (both those who are represented by IFCA and those who are not), and staff delivering fostering services. To ensure that all of the stakeholders involved in foster care contributed to the review, Tusla in collaboration with the Irish Foster Care Association worked together in undertaking a national consultation with foster carers and social workers to provide opportunities for these groups to come together to discuss all aspects of Tusla's foster care services and to make recommendations to inform the development of the Alternative Care Strategy. Consultations and surveys were conducted with both foster carers and staff over a six month period. This work was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies.

### Tusla's Mission Statement:

*"To design and deliver supported, coordinated and evidence informed service that strive to ensure positive outcomes for children, families and communities".*

### Irish Foster Care Association's Mission Statement is:

*"The Irish Foster Care Association is the representative body for foster care in Ireland. Child-centred and rights-based, IFCA promotes excellence in foster care for all those involved".*

## Objective

The process of the consultations was designed to ensure that policy makers had the information needed to develop a strategy that would consider the needs of these key stakeholders. Policy makers can now plan with the confidence that the key voices of foster carers and social workers at the front line have been appropriately considered and heard throughout the process. In order to improve services, it is necessary to understand the experiences of foster carers and social workers involved in fostering, to identify areas where services in foster care can be improved, to cooperatively develop ideas for more creative and innovative uses of existing resources and networks, and to explore new ways of working.

The findings of these consultations will directly feed into the development of the Tusla, Child and Family Agency Alternative Care Strategy. The purpose of developing such a strategy is to:

- To ensure the voices of children, families, carers and staff are heard and central to the development of our services.
- To develop evidence based service provision that meets the needs of children in care.
- To develop principles that guide and frame how we provide care to children and families.
- To recognize our strengths and identify challenges within the services and work in a collaborative way in planning and providing care to children.
- To create a work environment for staff that is conducive to good practice.
- To work with our partners both internal and external.

## Methodology

Given the extent of the task involved, and in an effort to ensure that as many staff and carers would participate in this process the work was commissioned to an external organization, Quality Matters, who tendered for the work. Quality Matters is a charity established to support improvement in social services. Their role was to ascertain and evaluate information from the two stakeholder groups, the dissemination of surveys, investigation of the literature, and supporting the development of a report and action plan for IFCA and Tusla to inform the development of the Alternative Care Strategy and to review progress of implementation within a two year period. A Steering Group (SG) made up of representatives from Tusla and IFCA, including those in management, policy, research, social workers and foster carers, oversaw the project.

The research remit was to:

- Work with the steering group in planning and facilitating the consultation.
- Develop and design a survey.
- Provide analysis of the results of the survey.
- Undertake consultation sessions with staff and carers nationwide.
- Provide an analysis of the findings in a report format.

A series of workshops with foster carers and social workers was held in 15 towns across Ireland in 2016. In addition, surveys were sent to those who could not attend the workshops. 387 survey responses were received, and 55 hours of conversations with foster carers and social workers, (302 in total) including social workers, team leader social workers and principle social workers. The consultations were exploratory in nature, strengths based and solution focused. The focus was on identifying what was working well, what could be built on and where there is potential for innovation. Another core part of the process was to understand what was not working so well and why, and what steps needed to be taken to maximise the use of scant resources in these situations.

The result of the joint consultations is that the process of developing Tusla's Alternative Care Strategy will be informed by a greater understanding of the experiences of foster carers and social workers involved in fostering and which aims to identify areas within fostering which can be improved.

## Findings

21 topics were identified in the initial survey, and during national consultations as being areas of challenge to successful fostering services. They have been categorized into five themes.

Each of the recommend solutions are categorised under one of the following categories:

- **Culture** – The interlocking set of goals, expectations, roles, processes, values, communication practices, attitudes and assumptions inherent to the organisation
- **Policy** – The guidance, procedures and processes that underpin Tusla and IFCA
- **Capacity** – The people and resources that increase the organisations' functioning
- **Technology** – Equipment and devices that support organisational capacity
- **Systems** – The set of processes that work together as parts of a complex whole

Over the period August to October 2016 the Steering Group and Quality Matters commenced the task of analysing the findings and identifying key strengths and challenges within the system based on the feedback from foster carers and staff.

## Culture

The development of a learning culture with effective communication structures was identified as a key action in the 2015-17 Tusla corporate plan. Shaping and influencing organisational culture requires addressing the interlocking set of goals, expectations, roles, processes, values, communication practices, attitudes and assumptions, which are inherent to the organisational practices.

The initial survey highlighted that cultural issues of trust, respect and timely communication were further elaborated on during all 15 consultations. Foster carers felt that they were not “worked with” as partners in the process.

Key survey data stated:

- 75% of foster carers felt that they were respected by their social workers while over 90% of social workers felt respected by the foster families they supported
- 38% of social workers felt that they did not have time to communicate as needed with foster families they supported.
- 34% of foster carers felt that they did not receive timely communication from social workers.
- 63% of foster carers felt their contribution was acknowledged by social workers.

The pervasiveness of this critique points not to individual workers but to systemic cultural issues. That said, there were also numerous examples of strong partnership working practices across the country, as well as the positive tone and productivity during the consultations. Stakeholders saw the continuation of opportunities for collectively working and learning as key to improving these issues within the culture.

The national consultations also highlighted concerns about Tusla’s organisational culture and the impact of this on collaborative work practice within social work teams and between social workers and foster carers. The culture was perceived to focus on increasing regulations, high profile inspections, and negative media coverage. This was reflected in perceptions that overall communication approaches and management style was largely akin to a ‘business process’.

Many participants found a focus on process orientation positive and one where understanding and clarity should be strengthened, as discussed in the policy section of this summary report.

Consultations demonstrated an appetite and willingness to participate in a shift towards a more open, transparent and supportive culture where collaboration, open communication, and joint working was a norm.

## Policy

Policies, the codification of procedures and processes, are a key pillar of a well-functioning organisation. Tusla is clear on the principles, key policies, and legislative frameworks that underpin its work. However, national consultations highlighted that there is a lack of clarity and consistency in relation to the operationalisation of many policies and work processes. Concerns were also raised about how specific work

practice issues were raised repeatedly within the system with differences in approach, interpretation, and implementation of policy as leading to significant frustration, to ineffective practice and it was felt they were not addressed in a timely or consistent manner.

Consultations highlighted a need for a more effective policy development process to ensure transparency, consistency, and clarity, while also allowing for professional judgment.

### Capacity

Building staff capacity is a core component in Tusla's 2015-17 corporate plan and is integrally tied to the organisation's ability to assess needs, strategically plan services, and monitor and evaluate outcomes. Capacity in this context comprises of not only the organisation's internal human resources but, given the nature of fostering, also addresses external resources relied on to provide care or deliver services.

Consultations highlighted significant capacity constraints in relation to current levels of social work staffing in numerous regions. In these areas, staffing was considered inadequate to meet demands and deliver an appropriate quality care.

Equally important, but not mentioned in the corporate plan, is building the capacity of foster carers nationally, in terms of both numbers of foster carers and the skill sets of some foster carers to cater to specific higher need cases. Consultations underscored the need for this: there are simply not enough foster carers assessed, trained and with the skills required to support the numbers and/or complexity of children requiring care. This has implications in relation to the placement of children and matching of placements.

Relative carers comprise approximately 28% of foster carers. Supports for newer foster carers and relative foster carers to enable them to develop in their new roles were also negatively impacted by social work capacity and organisational supports.

There was an identified need for IFCA to play an important role in addressing the necessary supports for newer foster carers and relative carers.

The capacity of external agencies, services and statutory bodies were noted during consultations as significantly impacting fostering stakeholders including the judiciary (judges, barristers and solicitors), health and mental health service providers, and Guardian Ad Litem services.

Consultation participants viewed the challenges identified above as key contributors to placement breakdown creating a cyclical effect in the fostering system. It was a broadly held view that directing resources to the key findings would significantly contribute to improvements in supports for children and foster carers leading to more stable placements, potential for significant savings for other state services, and most importantly, better services for vulnerable children.

### Technology

At the root of many of the challenges identified during consultations was the need for a national information management system to enable effective and efficient working. Social work teams currently operate with a paper-based system which has a high administrative burden and insufficient infrastructure for capturing, sharing or accessing relevant information in a timely fashion.

Limitations of the current paper based fostering systems hamper access to, or critical assessment of, information in a timely fashion.

Consensus was that a well-designed system could have significant positive impacts on everything from after-hours supports through to strategic planning.

Training was highlighted as a key issue that could benefit from a technology solution. Knowledge and expertise critical to issues in fostering (sexual abuse, complex trauma, addiction, attachment etc.) are dispersed throughout the social work teams and external stakeholders (IFCA, foster carers, professionals) nationally. While there are many trainings taking place nationally, proactive communications to stakeholders internally and externally about training or like activities were presented as a particular problem including lack of notification or receiving notification on the day of training. Participants during consultations also highlighted the need for access to information 'just in time' and that they were challenged by the lack of out of hours services provided by IFCA and social work teams when they encountered a situation for which they were not prepared.

### Systems

Consultations identified areas where systems were less than optimal, impacting both on service delivery and the ability to address stakeholder's needs.

Communications systems - how the agency disseminates information quickly, efficiently, and thoroughly, was repeatedly highlighted in the pre-consultation surveys and by consultation participants who cited 'lack of communication' as a core area of concern.

For foster carers, challenges in communication centred mainly on the need for better and transparent information sharing at numerous points in the fostering processes, a need for more accessibility of meeting notes from child in care reviews, and when there were changes to care arrangements (access, allegations, judicial proceedings, potential disruptions etc.).

Performance management systems that aligned agency and individual goals with feedback loops for clients was also seen as an area for improvement.

### Conclusion

Tusla and IFCA welcome the findings of the consultation initiative and Tusla are committed to using the findings and analysis of information to inform and guide the development of the Alternative Care Strategy of which IFCA will be a participant and contributor. Tusla recognises many of the themes identified within the findings and will continue to work to address these issues, some of which are in process. Examples of current work been undertaken to address some of the challenges identified in the consultation include;

- Developing a National Child Care Information System that will provide a national IT system for staff working in alternative care.
- The development of an out of hour's service that will extend to foster care.
- Development of training initiatives for foster carers and staff.

- The roll out of Leadership Development training.
- Pilots in relation to the use of remote accessibility to IT systems when out of office.
- Ongoing fostering campaigns

In response to issues raised during the consultations, IFCA has initiated a number of actions which includes;

- The commencement of the development of information leaflets on Allegations, Insurance and the role of Guardian Ad Litem.
- Recruitment and training of additional volunteers for the Support Helpline

The outcomes of the joint consultations reaffirm for IFCA the needs of foster carers. IFCA wishes to build on and develop its Support and Learning and Development Services to further enhance and support foster carers and others involved in Foster care.

Both Tusla and IFCA welcomes the findings of the consultations and welcomes opportunities for joint initiatives, such as training, and the development of information resources.

To conclude Tusla and IFCA would like to acknowledge the contribution of all the staff and foster carers that contributed to this process and again commit to ensuring that the findings that have emerged from this process will be used to inform the development of the Alternative Care Strategy.

Jim Gibson,

  
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