

**Opening Statement by the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) to
the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability,
Integration and Youth.**

My name is Dr Valerie O'Brien. I am the Chairperson of the Special Interest Group on Foster Care in the Irish Association of Social Workers, an Associate Professor at UCD and a research practitioner with substantial experience in this area. This is my colleague Áine McGuirk, Member of IASW, experienced senior practitioner with significant experience in Foster Care and former Chair of the IASW Board of Directors. A key priority goal of the IASW is to influence a change agenda in the delivery and development of foster care services.

By way of background, the Irish Association of Social Workers was founded in 1971 and is the National representative professional body for social work and for the approximately 5,000 registered social workers in Ireland. We are an active member of the International Federation of Social Workers, which represents professional social work associations from over fifty-five different countries globally.

The association is a registered company and is run by a voluntary Board of Directors, which is elected annually by the membership. The Board is supported by the activities of Council representing the principal areas of social work activity in Ireland (children and families, foster care, mental health, probation, primary care, disability, hospitals, migrants, etc.). The aim of SWIFC (Social Workers in Foster Care) Special Interest Group is to provide a forum for Social Workers engaged in Foster Care to express relevant professional perspectives and to advocate on behalf of children in Foster Care.

Ireland has a very significant reputation in the use of foster care over residential care. Tusla's Performance and Activity Report for May 2022 shows that 64% (3,742) of children in care are in general foster care and 26% (1,507) are in relative foster care, making a total of 90% of children in care that are catered for within fostering services. While this is to be commended, a worrying trend is the decline in the percentage of children in foster care over recent decades. This trend needs careful attention.

Social Work is the key profession in the recruitment, assessment, review, and support of families providing foster care services in Ireland, as well as the primary support for children placed with foster families.

From the 1970s the employment of social workers in the community health sector facilitated the development of the foster care services we have today. This work is now the responsibility of Tusla, who employ more than 1,600 social workers.

As the professional representative group for social workers, we welcome the opportunity to place our concerns and recommendations for foster care in Ireland before the committee.

Our key concerns include:

Recruitment and Retention of foster carers needed to uphold the central role of foster care in our child welfare system

- The recruitment and retention of Foster Carers poses significant difficulties. This is linked to changing demographics, ongoing stresses of living, the effect of the significant traumas experienced by children prior to coming into care, the need to satisfy regulatory requirements, and the challenge of ensuring safe care for all in the foster household.
- Providing foster care placement in the child's community is a challenge with children being placed far from home, impacting significantly on their relationship with their family and wider community, their identity formation and posing significant difficulties in facilitating good access arrangements.
- The retention of foster carers in the system is affected by the manner in which complaints about them are processed and these concerns have not been alleviated by aspects of the implementation of the Child Abuse Substantiation Policy (CASAP) 2022.

Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers

- The IASW has presented our concerns to the Oireachtas previously regarding the ongoing challenge of recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of Social Work professionals. This is important in this context so that the best support can be provided for our foster care services. The allocation of a sufficient number of social workers is imperative to develop a fully supportive working relationship and support system with the foster family. This relationship encompasses recruitment and assessment of foster carers, matching and placing children, ensuring on going regulatory compliance (supervision and review), supporting birth families, advocating for the child in placement, interacting with other professionals to achieve best outcomes and by no means least, responding appropriately to ongoing concerns, issues, and crisis events that arise for families providing foster care.

Support Services for Birth Parents of Children in Care

- There are almost no services dedicated to the support of birth parents. Parents who lose their children to care represent one of the most vulnerable sections of Irish society and their already immense problems are compounded by the loss of their children to care.

Access to Services for Children in Care

- Interdepartmental action is required to address the complexities of ensuring that the state, acting *in loco parentis*, can fulfil its responsibilities towards this cohort of children while addressing its responsibilities towards all children – including those that are vulnerable and not in state care.
- While there has been some development in addressing the individual child’s needs, therapy services specifically aimed at addressing multiple and complex relationships in the networks of care – including professionals – are urgently required. The difficulties of children who require state care are well documented, and placement in a foster home is just the beginning of the process to cater for the full range of a traumatised child’s needs.
- Structures in Tusla need attention, to ensure flexible service delivery and provide a consistent, knowledgeable, and holistic service to children in care and their foster carers. A greater organisational focus on task over roles would be an important first step.

Child Centred Issues

Adoption for Children in Care

- The availability of adoption to those children in care where this is the appropriate and proportionate response is a welcome development. Statistics from the annual reports of the Adoption Authority of Ireland show that there has been no significant growth in the granting of adoption orders for children in care over the past five years. Greater attention to this context is needed.

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
21	25	21	16	24

(Adoption Authority of Ireland Annual Report 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021)

Children Seeking Asylum: Need for Enhanced Placement and After-Care Planning

- Recent world events have placed significant strain on resources provided to deal with Separated Children seeking asylum. In May 2022 Tusla reported 137 such children, with just twenty-five provided for in Foster Care.

- Providing adequate services for these young people requires further strategic interdepartmental attention.

Placement Breakdown

- Placements can break down including after a child has spent a significant part of their life with a foster family. There is an urgent need for research into placement disruptions as well as research into placements that do not break down, as each cohort may provide useful information for the other, and for our overall understanding of the relevant issues.
- In the short term – Tusla information systems needs to collate this information at a national level – whilst considering the complexity of pathways into care and breakdown processes and outcomes i.e., where the children move to residential care or are discharged from state care.

Foster Care Service Delivery

The Place of Privatisation

- The commodification of care, through privatisation, is a serious policy issue that requires immediate attention.

A Government-mandated Working Party to take on the task of reviewing foster care policy, the legislation, resources, and best practice.

- The IASW, through its SWIFC Special Interest Group, prepared a consultation document, *Envisioning the Future*, in 2017 and many of the concerns outlined there remain: That document:
- Outlines views on the changing environment within which services for children now operate.
- Identifies a range of the change drivers at play that are impacting on social work relationships with the various stakeholders.

The paper concludes with a range of recommendations that are intended to provide a basis for discussion between the various stakeholders. Fundamental to this is the need for a government-mandated Working Party to take on the task of reviewing foster care policy, the legislation, resources, and best practice.

Recommendations to the Committee

The following would assist in supporting the development of enhanced foster care services in Ireland.

Need for a Government-mandated National Working Party

This group would review foster care policy, the legislation, resources, and best practice, and consider outcomes in alignment with the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child. Leadership is key and the project should be sufficiently resourced to manage it to a level that reflects the importance of this work for the children of Ireland.

Under the leadership of the Minister for Children the working party would:

- Establish a shared, objective assessment of the suitability and availability of foster care for a range of different childhood care needs across Ireland.
- Engage with relevant Government Departments, in particular: Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Education, Social Protection, and Justice.
- Coordinate the contribution of key executive agencies including Tusla – Child and Family Agency, the Health Service Executive, Education, local authorities, An Garda Síochána, professional and representative bodies, academia, and the private and voluntary sector.
- Collect key contributions from those with lived experience of foster care and their representative associations (Foster carers-IFCA, children and adults with care experience - EPIC, birth families, social workers - IASW, etc.).
- Build and support a coalition of stakeholders to establish a vision for fostering in Ireland that will support, champion, and promote the delivery of shared objectives for high quality foster care services. across all government departments, executive agencies, the private and voluntary sector.

Thank you for inviting us to the Joint-Committee today. We are happy to answer your questions.

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