FOSTER CARE

A National Consultation with Foster Carers & Social Workers 2015 - 2016

Briefing Paper: Irish Foster Care Association and Tusla
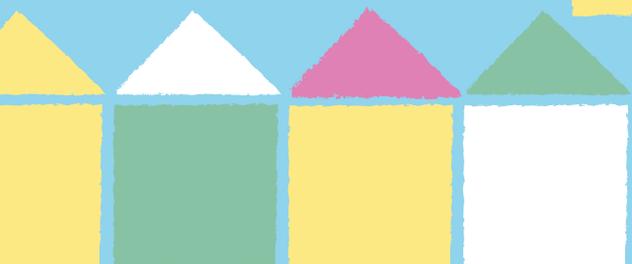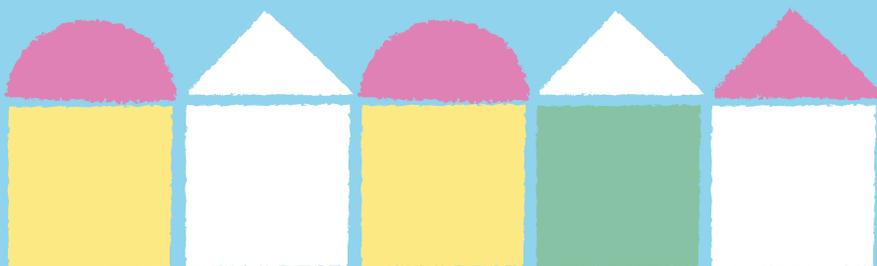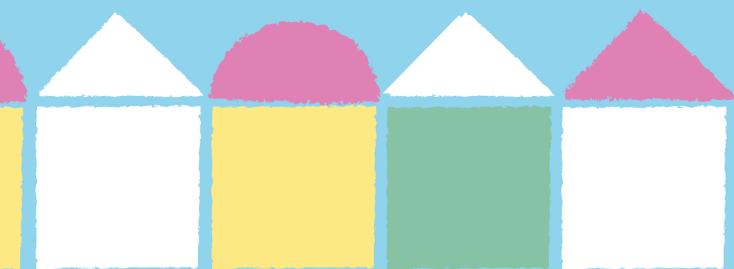
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Joint Statement from Tusla & Irish Foster Care Association CEOs

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 his or her own family, either on a short or long term basis. Foster care is mainly provided by Tusla in Ireland and is also referred to as alternative care. Currently, 92% of children in care in Ireland are in foster care, with approximately 30% of children living in foster care with their relatives. Given the important role foster care has in alternative care and the role foster carers play in the lives of vulnerable children, Tusla has a responsibility to ensure that a robust process exists to recruit, select and support foster carers in their task.

The provision of foster care services is complex. It involves many stakeholders, including children and young people, birth parents, extended family, foster carers, Tusla, and other state departments including the judiciary. Foster care provides care for children through a partnership approach involving families, foster carers and other professionals. A quality fostering service requires highly skilled staff who can navigate relationships while ensuring the welfare of the child is paramount to their work. Both Tusla and the Irish Foster Care Association acknowledge the work of foster carers and social workers in Ireland and commend the service they provide to children and their families. In Ireland, the large numbers of children in foster care is testament to the families who foster and the staff who work closely with them in ensuring that children have the opportunity to live in a safe family environment.

In January 2016, Tusla and the Irish Foster Care Association initiated a process of consultation between two stakeholder groups - foster carers and social workers - in order to proactively identify service gaps from a national perspective. The unique and fresh approach brought together over 300 foster carers and social workers to discuss possible solutions to the challenges they faced. The results of these collaborative conversations form the content of this report. It brings the voices of foster carers and social workers into focus, highlighting the key strategic and structural issues impacting on services delivered to children in care, as well as those who care for them.

In commissioning this work jointly, the Irish Foster Care Association and Tusla demonstrated the power and importance of agencies working together to identify issues and affect change. The process is a bold and purposeful step to ensure that the experience of key stakeholders, are core to the formation of Tusla's new Alternative Care Strategy. This process has benefited from the support of The Atlantic Philanthropies whose vision for improving children's services has helped progress this vital work.

This report, which captured the consultations at a point in time during 2015/2016 lays out over 38 key thematic findings and suggestions for change, including a need for clarity of policy, increasing the number of social workers and foster carers, improving training and leadership development, and using technology to better enable work and information sharing. Underpinning all the suggestions is recognition of the need for a cultural shift towards increased openness, partnership and mutual respect being embedded in our everyday work.

The consultation process was a clear move towards this objective. It is important to note that many of the identified suggestions are currently being addressed by the Irish Foster Care Association and Tusla, and these developments are outlined in chapter eight of this report. Those issues not currently under development will be prioritised for consideration in the development of the strategy in order to improve outcomes for children by effectively supporting those delivering services and caring for children.

The process, facilitated by Quality Matters, ensured the safe sharing of concerns by participants, and transparency of the process by which findings and suggestions were identified. Participant contributions have added to our understanding of the challenges, have started a 'co-production' of solutions, and have deepened a shared commitment to resolving the issues raised. The overwhelming positive engagement in the consultation process points towards a bright future building these solutions together.

Both Tusla and the Irish Foster Care Association would like to express sincere appreciation to the foster carers and social workers whose participation made this report possible. Their willingness to be open, to step into the shoes of others, to honestly share their experiences and develop solutions together is a cornerstone on which we will continue to build by promoting the implementation of this report's suggestions.

We look forward to working with our many stakeholders to make this happen.

Fred McBride,
Tusla CEO
& Catherine Bond,
Irish Foster Care Association CEO

June 2017

1 INTRODUCTION TO THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

1.1   Overview

This report is the result of over 60 hours of conversation with over 300 foster carers, social workers, principal social workers and Tusla Area Managers throughout Ireland. The process commenced with a survey in late 2015, followed by a series of 15 consultations, which were held over the course of five months from February to April, 2016. Following this, there was a period of review with the oversight group and an opportunity provided for Area Managers to engage in the process. This report embodies the experiences of foster carers and social workers in providing foster care services. The enthusiastic engagement in this process is a clear expression of the genuine commitment of multiple stakeholders to finding solutions and working together to improve fostering relationships and experiences for children and families.

The purpose of this report is to support policy makers and management to develop an Alternative Care Strategy that considers the needs of key stakeholders including social workers, foster carers and foster children. This report outlines a number of detailed suggestions generated throughout the consultations and which the joint Oversight Group has considered and approved for publication.

The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) and Tusla wish to acknowledge The Atlantic Philanthropies for their funding and support for this process as part of the development of the National Alternative Care Strategy.

1.2   Discussion document: Listening to Foster Carers and Social Workers

For readers who wish to develop a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the issues facing foster carers and social workers, as well as their aspirations for fostering, the discussion document will make interesting and informative reading. The appendix outlines how the content of the full discussion document has been consolidated within the themes of this briefing document.

1.3   A Focus on Sector Challenges

Each of the 15 consultations was held over a three and half hour morning session. The number of attendees ranged from between 10 and 50. Limited time for the consultation process and high participant engagement meant that conversations needed to be highly structured. This enabled full participation, as well as discussion and clarification of what were often complex and multi-layered issues. In order to achieve this and create a positive consultation experience for those involved, the initial exercises and group discussions focused on creating a safe space. The process then involved the identification of issues and challenges experienced by both foster carers and social workers, followed by the development of potential practical suggestions for future change.

The agenda of these consultations did not allow for a significant discussion of organisational strengths, which had been identified within the survey. The task of detailing interesting pilots or innovations occurring within the sector was also outside the scope of this consultation. Readers of this report should be aware of the fact that the lack of a detailed discussion on what is working well within the sector does not mean that things are not working well, but rather that enumerating these was not a focus of the consultation.

This report is the result of over 60 hours of conversation with over 300 foster carers, social workers, principal social workers and Tusla Area Managers throughout Ireland.

1.4   A Summary of Sector Strengths

As stated above, a number of system strengths were noted within the sector based surveys undertaken at the beginning of the consultation as an initial consultation step. Highlights of strengths within the system are outlined below:

FOSTER CARER RESPONDENTS
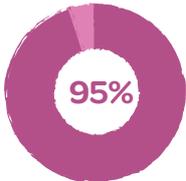
95%
Reported that knowing that they have helped a child or family in need as being a reward they experienced in foster caring
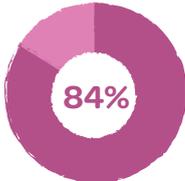
84%
Feel they understand how the system of foster care works
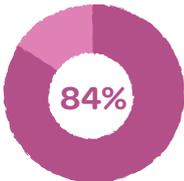
84%
Feel appropriately or somewhat appropriately supported when seeking advice regarding a child with a history of abuse
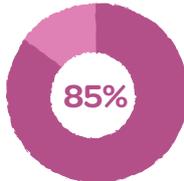
85%
Reported that the Foster Carer review was positive or somewhat positive / useful

MORE THAN 70%
Reported a positive rating of *very good* or *good* regarding their local Foster Carers group

SOCIAL WORKER RESPONDENTS

99%
Feel supported by management when integrating a child into a foster family

89%
Reported that they had appropriate or somewhat appropriate knowledge to deal with a child making a disclosure of abuse

89%
Feel skilled or appropriately skilled to deal with a placement breakdown

99%
Believe that IFCA is a useful or a somewhat useful support to their families

87%
Reported that they strongly agree or agree that they feel respected by the foster families with whom they work

93%
Reported that they agree or strongly agree that the foster family and themselves work together to solve problems on behalf of the child

92%
Received training in the past year

These strengths are testament to the good work being done within the sector by Tusla, IFCA and not least, by social workers and Foster carers.

1.5 Methodology - The Consultation Process

This process began in 2015 with desktop research and a survey on experiences of working in alternative care. The survey was sent to foster carers and social workers across the country; both Tusla and IFCA supported the engagement of key stakeholders. Survey results were then presented as part of the introductory sessions within the regional consultations. The purpose of the regional consultations was to understand the experiences of foster carers and social workers involved in fostering and to identify areas where services could be improved. The consultations engaged participants openly, honestly, and critically around issues of key importance in the fostering relationship. The consultations were exploratory in nature and solution-focused. After examination of shared challenges, foster carers and social workers were facilitated to develop suggestions for how things could be improved.

It was hoped that the consultations would strengthen collaboration and reinvigorate partnerships between social workers and foster carers who ultimately come to the work of fostering because they care deeply about supporting and caring for children. With very few exceptions, participants left the consultations expressing their sincere appreciation for the opportunity to collaborate and develop a deeper understanding of challenges from the perspective of other professionals, and had a renewed optimism for the future of fostering in Ireland.

1.6 Report Structure

This summary document outlines five key areas, each of which contains a number of detailed suggestions for change. These suggestions were made by social workers, foster carers, principal social workers and Area Managers and have been endorsed by the Oversight Group. Each suggestion is outlined 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 alternative care

- **Capacity** – The people and resources that increase the organisation's functioning

- **Technology** – Equipment and systems that support organisational capacity

- **Systems** – The set of processes that work together as parts of a complex whole

Chapter eight highlights developments that have been progressed since the consultations. Where developments address a key finding in this report, this is identified below the summary finding in the body of the text.

1.7 Oversight and Facilitation

An oversight group with representatives from Tusla and IFCA, including social workers and foster carers, oversaw the consultation process and the development of the discussion document and briefing documents.

Quality Matters, a charity established to support improvement in social services, was retained through a tendering process to facilitate this project. Their role involved developing the discussion and briefing documents by drawing together information from; a sector survey, 15 regional consultation workshops with foster carers and social workers, consultation workshops with Principal social workers and Area Managers and seven workshops with the Oversight Group. It was the role of Quality Matters to ensure that all content from the consultations that was raised by at least three people is summarised in this briefing paper.

1.8   Acknowledgment and Management of Limitations

The report reflects the results of a consultation process that was exploratory in nature and aimed to examine foster carers' and social workers' perceptions of problems in the Irish care system and potential solutions to these problems. The report draws only on the perspectives of the individuals involved in the consultation, and does not include literature reviews or independent expert assessment. In common with all research and consultation processes, there are a number of limitations, which should be noted to fully appreciate the work within the context in which it was developed.

The consultation report represents a snapshot in time, reflecting the experience of social workers and foster carers from late 2015 to mid 2016, drawing on examples from practice from the years prior to the consultation. Chapter Eight highlights a number of initiatives that have been progressed by Tusla and/or IFCA, which address one or more issues raised in the consultations.

It is also important to note that the report does not identify regional variations. Often an area of work that was considered a strength in one region required further development in another. A general theme arising through the consultations was that the overall system would benefit from ensuring that strengths in process and practice become standardised across all regions.

On occasion, consultation subjects have identified suggestions, which are currently in operation, or have been developed since the consultations commenced. Training was an area where this was particularly apparent. This may be due to the fact that developments are relatively new, or alternatively could point to the fact that the communication or opera-tionalisation of change has not resulted in awareness or improvements at the frontline in all regions. In some cases, where suggestions for change refer to actions or systems that are in place already, additional exploration may be required to understand why frontline staff in some regions continue to identify gaps.

As two key stakeholder groups, foster carers and social workers engaged productively in this process. Tusla is engaging with EPIC in relation to ensuring that the voices of young people are heard, and will be undertaking consultation with families of origin on the implementation of key objectives within the strategy. Together it is hoped this report and other stakeholder engagement processes can productively inform the development of the Alternative Care Strategy, which will provide a vital roadmap for this important work.

It was hoped that the consultations would strenghthen collaboration and reinvigorate partnerships between social workers and foster carers who ultimately come to the work of fostering because they care deeply about supporting and caring for children.
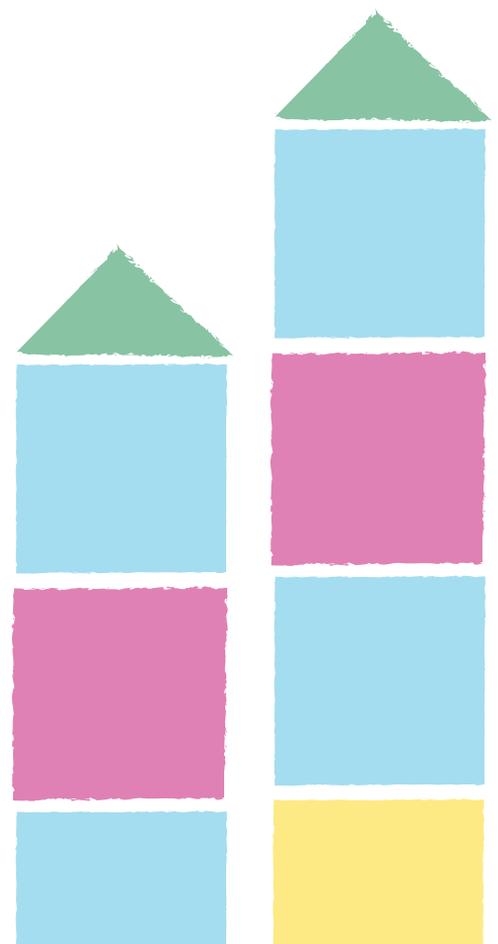
2 FOSTER CARE IN IRELAND: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION
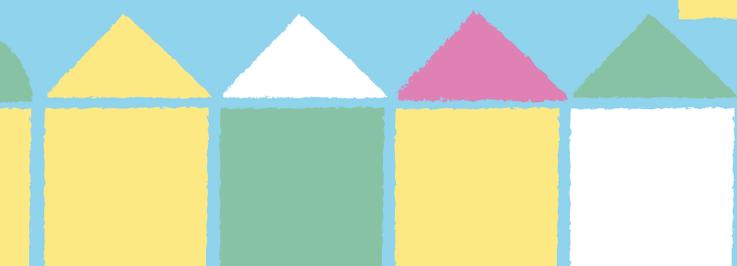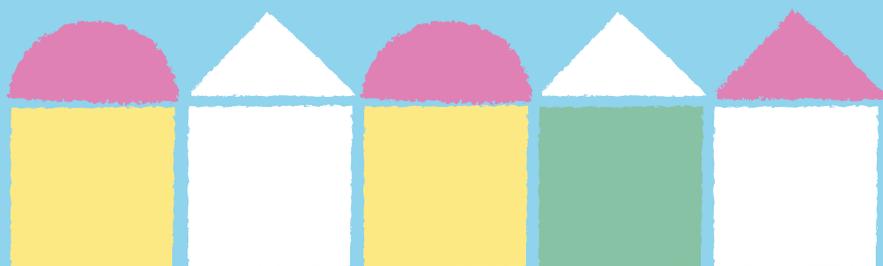
2.1   Introduction

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 his or her own family, either on a short or long term basis. The primary role of a foster carer is to take the child into their home and provide care for the child, not only in terms of offering food and shelter, but also caring for the child emotionally. Foster carers support children who may be dealing with issues of neglect, abuse, or abandonment and help them to feel supported, loved and accepted unconditionally (1).

Every effort should be made to make foster care a positive experience and a healing process for the child. Threats to a child's development from abuse and neglect, should be understood by all participants in the child welfare system.

There are currently 4,774 foster carers in Ireland (2). Approximately 92% of children placed in care are in foster care; 30% with extended family (9). The percentage of children in care within family homes, as opposed to institutional care, is a significant strength of the Irish Alternative Care system.

Foster care is provided primarily by Tusla through recruitment, assessment and approval of families willing to engage in providing care to children in need of care and protection. Support and Supervision to foster carers is also provided by Tusla though the Social Work teams. Tusla social workers are registered through CORU, Ireland's first health care regulator.

The work of Tusla, in relation to alternative care, is governed by the Child Care Act 1991 and the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 (3). The National Standards for Foster Care, 2003 (4) also 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.

Other supports to foster carers are provided by the Irish Foster Care Association [a non-statutory organisation, who are the NGO based representative body for foster care in Ireland.] IFCA's membership is comprised of foster and relative carers, social workers, social care workers, childcare workers, academics and others with an interest in foster care.

IFCA has over 1,500 members and provides a range of services to its members including a support helpline, a range of learning opportunities and peer support to members at local level. IFCA advocates on behalf of its members with Tusla, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and other relevant bodies.

Fostering placements in Ireland are organised by Tusla (Child and Family Agency) and it is this agency's responsibility to approve every foster carer in Ireland. Every foster carer should have access to (5):

- A Link Worker, who is primarily responsible for the supervision and support of foster carers. Link Workers should have contact with foster carers regularly via telephone and visits

- Regular support/training group meetings where topics of interest are discussed

- A child and family social worker who visits the child in the foster home and maintains a link with the child's birth family. This role centres on a responsibility for the safety and welfare of a child

Where a child needs specialised services, social workers have a key role supporting access to and co-ordinating care between multiple professionals, for example, Speech Therapists, Counsellors and Psychologists. Respite care for foster children may also be arranged if necessary and appropriate, where it is part of the care plan.

Further support for carers is also provided by way of allowance provided by the State. In 2015, this allowance was: under 12 years old – €325 per child per week, over 12 years old – €352 per child per week. An allowance may be paid between the ages of 18 and 23 where the child is still with the family and in full time education (6). The Irish allowance compares favourably to other EU countries and has equivalence to international rates[1].

Key to the work of foster carers and social workers - in legislation, policy guidance and practice - is the understanding that the best interests of the child must lie at the beginning and end of each decision and care-planning step. It is also understood that this goal can only be achieved through effective partnership working. The consultation process from which this report was developed sought to engage social workers and foster carers, to identify ways of improving the system within which they work. This, in turn, will support them in achieving their communal goal of providing high quality, child centred care.

3 FINDINGS: CULTURE
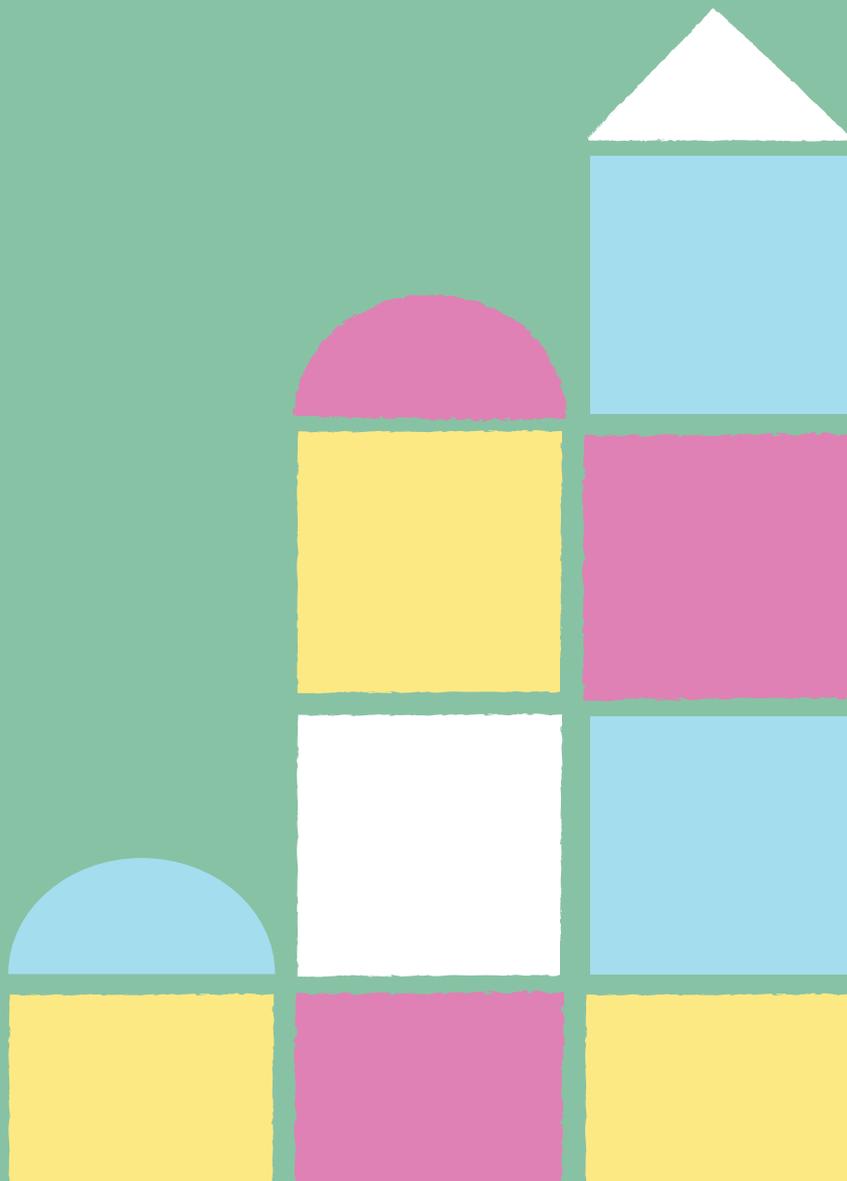
3.1   Overview

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 consultation process highlighted numerous examples of strong partnership working practices across the country and gave examples of how good interagency working and genuine partnership working impacted positively on children. The consultations also highlighted some challenges in communication processes. The most significant challenge raised within the surveys and national consultations was that foster carers, on occasion, felt disrespected by the tone and nature of communications with social workers. Connected to this issue was a view that foster carers were not sufficiently part of a partnership process in their engagement with social workers. The initial survey highlighted cultural issues in relation to trust, respect and timely communication. These issues were further elaborated on during all 15 consultations. Key survey data stated:

SOCIAL WORKERS   FOSTER CARERS

RESPECT

OVER 90%

Felt respected by the foster families they supported

75%

Felt that they were respected by their SWs

SOCIAL WORKERS   FOSTER CARERS

COMMUNICATION

38%

Felt that they did not have time to communicate, as needed, with foster families they supported

34%

Felt that they did not receive timely communication from SWs

CONTRIBUTION

37%

Felt that their contribution was not acknowledged by SWs

The national consultations also highlighted some concerns about a tendency for Tusla, in the past, to be risk-averse, particularly when it came to innovation and programme development. This culture was viewed, in part, to be driven by increasing regulations, high profile inspections, and negative media coverage.

There was a perception that overall communication approaches and management style could be, at times too top-down, reactive, and liability oriented. Consultations demonstrated an appetite and willingness to participate in a shift towards a more open, transparent and supportive culture where collaboration, open communication, and partnership working was a norm.

3.2 Suggestions to Inform Strategic Planning

3.2.1 Values Based Cultural Statement for Tusla

Develop an organisational statement on culture, which clarifies the values that are important to stakeholders in the system, such as respect, co-operation, a no-blame/learning culture. This statement to be operationalised through a cultural training programme, which is adult education based, and involves foster carers and social workers. Trainings to be developed with foster carers and social workers in a way that encourages sharing of experiences and challenges, and supports the development of empathy. The training to also provide opportunities to detail and model what respect and co-operation means for each group in a variety of challenging workplace contexts.

3.2.2 Leadership Development

Invest in leadership development programmes for people managers and individuals interested in progressing into management. Leadership programmes to support identified and desired cultural behavioural change as well as good management and change-management practice.

Create opportunities for social workers and Foster carers to productively problem solve and learn together.

Training to provide the skills and knowledge needed to create a collaborative, service user orientated culture and to support cross regional pollination of best practice. It is recommended, that at minimum, the leadership development programme should be built to encompass the following leadership skills and be underpinned by a values based leadership approach:

- Creating positive client focused work cultures
- Supporting positive team dynamics and good working relationships
- Developing and supervising staff
- Motivating people
- Change management
- Conflict management
- Effective communication approaches
- Planning, decision making, and problem solving

Executive management mentoring and the integration of key performance metrics into an annual performance review process were regarded as features that could enhance the programme's success.

Status: In train (see Chapter 8 – 8.1.1)

3.2.3 Opportunities for Collaboration

Create opportunities for social workers and foster carers to productively problem solve and learn together. These opportunities to be developed in partnership with IFCA. Opportunities for such collaborations and cross regional pollination of best practice to be encouraged regionally and supported nationally with resources and methodological guidance.

Status: in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.1.2)

3.2.4 Measure Change

Develop a standardised survey to be undertaken every two years with all social workers and foster carers in order to assess the current status of collegial culture and co-operation. The survey to measure what matters most to social worker and foster carers about their workplace culture and practice. This should reference the key elements of good organisational culture (an outcome of 2.2.1). Based on feedback from the consultations this should include the following areas of stakeholder concern:

- Decision making autonomy (Social worker)
- Workload (Social worker)

- Professional growth and development (social worker)

- Morale (social worker/foster carer)

- Collegial empathy (social worker/foster carer)

- Workplace supports (social worker/foster carer)

- Impact of and personal connection to work (social worker/foster carer)

- Effectiveness and clarity of communications (social worker/foster carer)

- Perceptions of teamwork, fairness and respect (social worker/foster carer)

- Inclusion in decision making (foster carer)

Survey results by region and subsequent action plans to be shared with all internal and external stakeholders.

3.2.5 Review Processes for Cultural Fit and to ensure these Promote Collaboration
Specific processes including: requests for respite, court proceedings, and Children in Care (CIC) and foster care (foster carer) reviews to be examined and revised to ensure that they reinforce collaboration, increase communication, and do not contribute to stigmatisation for children and foster carers.

3.2.6 Destigmatise Foster Care Allowance and Support Financial Planning for Foster Children
National guidance on financial planning and arrangements for foster children under 18 to be developed in consultation with foster children, social workers and foster carers including:

- Age appropriate guidance tools for children (under 12 and 12 – 18) about the fostering allowance which destigmatises the fostering allowance for children. This to assist all stakeholders to explain and contextualise foster care allowance openly with young people, explaining its purpose and use

- A financial tool kit for young adults which supports life skill development and aftercare processes

- Specific support documentation and training for social workers, foster carers, and young adults on financial planning

These guidance tools to be: built into reviews (Child in Care and foster carer) and assessment processes, be rights based, and recognise the agency and unique circumstances of individual children and young people. These tools to openly address the purpose and use of the fostering allowance.

3.2.7 Renaming Aftercare
The term 'aftercare', as used by foster carers/social workers and Foster children to be considered for adaptation[1]. This will be done through a review with foster children (engaging EPIC and Tusla), to review if this is a significant issue for young people.

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.

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1   The use of the term aftercare in official documents and legislation or some policies may not be able to be adapted

4 FINDINGS: POLICY

4.1   Overview

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 polices and work processes. Concerns were also raised about how specific work practice issues were raised repeatedly within the system and were not addressed in a timely or consistent manner. A lack of clarity and timely resolution of issues impacts on the everyday work of social workers and foster carers. Differences in approach, interpretation, and implementation of policy were reported as leading to significant frustration, inefficiencies, perceptions of decisions being made based on personality rather than policy or process, and, in some cases, to ineffective practice. A lack of clarity can also extend to relationships with external partner agencies and also resulted in challenges in working with other departments in Tusla.

Consultations highlighted a need for a more effective policy development process to ensure transparency, consistency, and clarity, while also allowing for professional judgement for social workers. A significant number of the problems identified during the consultations had their root cause in a lack of clear policy and/or a lack of consistent application of policies, namely:

- Policies not being available as they were still under development or review; and/or,

- Policies lacking necessary practice detail or clarity; and/or

- Policies being interpreted differently by various stakeholders in the implementation process.

4.2   Suggestions to Inform Strategic Planning

4.2.1   Further Develop the Approach to Policy and Practice

A strategic statement to be developed that will clarify Tusla's approach to the development of alternative care policy, guidance and practice. It will clarify key issues such as:

- The desired consistency in practice across Social Work areas

- The relationship between policy and guidance and the role of both

- That policy should not prevent professional assessment and informed, considered risk taking

- The process by which policy will be developed, adapted, implemented and communicated internally and externally

- The expectations and mechanisms for consulting and communicating with internal and external stakeholders in the development of policies

- How social workers and foster carers raise issues in relation to inadequate or unclear policy; how and within what timeframe this will be considered and responded to

Status: in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.2.1)

4.2.2   Undertake a Review of all Policies

A thorough policy review to be undertaken for all areas of work, this to be inclusive of all practice guides, manuals and tools. To ensure a timely process this review to be undertaken by a dedicated, temporary policy development team bought together for the purpose of clarifying and codifying all elements of practice to a higher level of detail than is currently present, and to address the specific areas of policy and practice ambiguity, or lack of consistent implementation, which are summarised below and detailed in the full consultation report. The process to include structured consultation, which engages all key stakeholders.

Areas that require particular clarification in policy or support to ensure consistent application in practice, or improvements in practice are outlined, by topic, below. It is recommended that policy and practice development in these areas is informed by the full consultation report, which explains these issues in more detail.

- **Access**

  - Clarify access protocols and definitions, including reviews of access

  - Clarify how a child's attitude/opinion towards access is considered in planning and decision making regarding access arrangements

  - Develop processes for handling refusal of access by foster children; clarify the process for reviewing access arrangements, and monitoring impact of access on children (when this is needed), and how access arrangements can be based on best interest and rights of the child when a child does not wish to have access

- Ensure access arrangements (including frequency) are communicated to foster carers at the earliest point and within six weeks of placement

- Clarify foster carer's role in access visits including; clarification on time of day and what is a reasonable expectation around travel

- Clarify supports for managing and addressing family dynamics related to access

- Tools and guidance for new social workers to support them in engaging with the courts and putting forth the views of the child

- Clarify when and how Tusla will challenge court decisions

■ **Aftercare**

- Provide guidance on the approaches to prepare children and foster carers for aftercare, ensure this occurs as early as possible and is integrated into care

- Clarify expectations and standards in the provision of aftercare and steps to actively engage at risk young people

- Financial guidance and supports for foster carers to be developed in relation to explaining payments to under 18s

- Assessments for children with special needs to be developed

■ **Allegations Against Foster Carers**

- Clarify the processes for addressing allegations against foster carers, the roles and responsibilities of each individual in the processes, and the recording of final decisions, as well as expected timeframes for decisions

- Clarify requirements for transparency of communications and how investigation neutrality is assured

■ **Challenges in Placement Breakdown**

- Review of case management and disruption report tools

- Develop policies, processes, and practice guidelines for addressing post-placement fostering breaks for foster carers and recognition of need for breaks

■ **Communication**

- Develop pro-active communication processes to effectively disseminate information to foster carers and social workers, at different points in the process, including the following which were named as particular issues:

  ▶ Approved, new or amended policies and protocols

  ▶ Notice of meetings (particularly CIC (Children in Care) and foster carer reviews)

  ▶ Training opportunities

  ▶ Decisions made by social workers or social worker teams to foster carers

- Clarify expectations on provision of emergency placement contact requirements for foster carers from social workers

- Clarify requirements for record keeping best practice expectations and communication practices for social workers in relation to CIC and foster carer reviews

- Develop an evaluation tool of communication quality to foster carers to be included in social worker team assessments

- Clarify administrative roles and increase administrative resources to support communication with all stakeholders

■ **Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention**

- Clarify processes and criteria informing placement decisions to support foster carer's understanding, and promote retention

- Develop policy or process for provision of a fostering closure process (including breaks from fostering)

- As detailed further, a recruitment strategy for foster carers to be developed

■ **Guardian Ad Litems [GALs]**

- To ensure the rights of the child, clarify the role of GALs, where they are appointed, the scope of their role, required professional standards, and levels of case engagement

- Develop code of conduct for GALs

■ **Legal Rights and Issues**

- Develop clear policies, processes, and guidance for:

  ▶ Cross border travel

  ▶ Care orders and parental permission

- ▶ Enhanced supports for children lacking documentation including emergency medical card, funds and temporary PPS number
- ▶ Seeking medical treatment and parental permissions
- ▶ Adoption applications and process
- ▶ Availability of documentation related to key decisions made by Tusla
- ▶ Enhanced rights: when to seek them, parent permission and inclusion in CIC reviews for long term care plans [in progress]
- ▶ Court proceedings and foster carer involvement
- ▶ Preparing for a holiday with foster Children
- ▶ Fostering allowance and its purpose [in progress]
- ▶ Financial arrangements for foster Children [in progress]
- ▶ Legal rights and regulation in relation to adoption, and processes for moving from fostering to adoption

- ■ **Liabilities and Insurance**
  - ● Develop a guide that comprehensively addresses all questions and issues related to personal liability, comprehensive cover (home, car, farm, property), wilful damage, and private health insurance

- ■ **Respite**
  - ● Provide clear guidance on provision and availability of respite that addresses the criteria and process used to determine approval
  - ● Develop guidance on the proactive provision of respite for those who need it
  - ● Develop process for the inclusion of relative carers in the provision of respite
  - ● Clarify the process for consideration of payment during respite

- ■ **Staffing levels and capacity**
  - ● Develop operational policies to streamline hiring, transfers, and replacement processes for staff

- ■ **Training**
  - ● Determine mandatory, professional development, and on-going training requirements for social workers and foster carers in consultation with IFCA

Status: Partially in train or completed (see Chapter 8 – 8.2.2 – 8.2.7 and 8.3.4)

4.2.3 Improve and Systematise Policy Implementation
Develop well-structured implementation processes for all policy areas, which include guidelines for communications, dissemination and training, feedback loops for implementation challenges, clear role responsibilities, regular review processes, and coordinated audits of implementation. Processes will be used to support consistent application of agreed policies and removal of any barriers preventing good practice. To support meaningful development and implementation of policies across the organisation, guidance and training to be provided for managers, including change-management and continuous quality improvement.

Status: in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.2.1)

4.2.4 Make Policies Publically Available
All approved policies and associated tools and forms to be published on Tusla's website to ensure work standards are easily accessible and available by both Tusla and IFCA staff and foster carers. When clarifications to policies, processes and forms are approved, these to be published on Tusla's website as soon as is possible.

4.2.5 Ensure Frontline Staff Have Access to Expertise
Tusla need to consider how to ensure that staff are made aware of policy development. Consideration should also be given to developing regional points of contact for staff in areas to link in with in relation to any policy issues. These points of contact should, in turn, be linked and work with the National Policy Manager for Alternative Care. Models such as the Area Implementation Group or Alternative Care Implementation Group to be considered as structures to support the communication and implementation of policy change.

4.2.6 Research into Private Fostering and Development of an Action Plan to Address identified Needs
Conduct research into private fostering arrangements (where children are cared for, for over 14 days by relatives outside formal notification to and/or arrangements with Tusla) to better understand the needs of those engaged. Note that this does not refer to foster carers working for private agencies, but rather informal foster care arrangements. An action plan to be developed to address recommendations arising from the research.

5 FINDINGS: CAPACITY
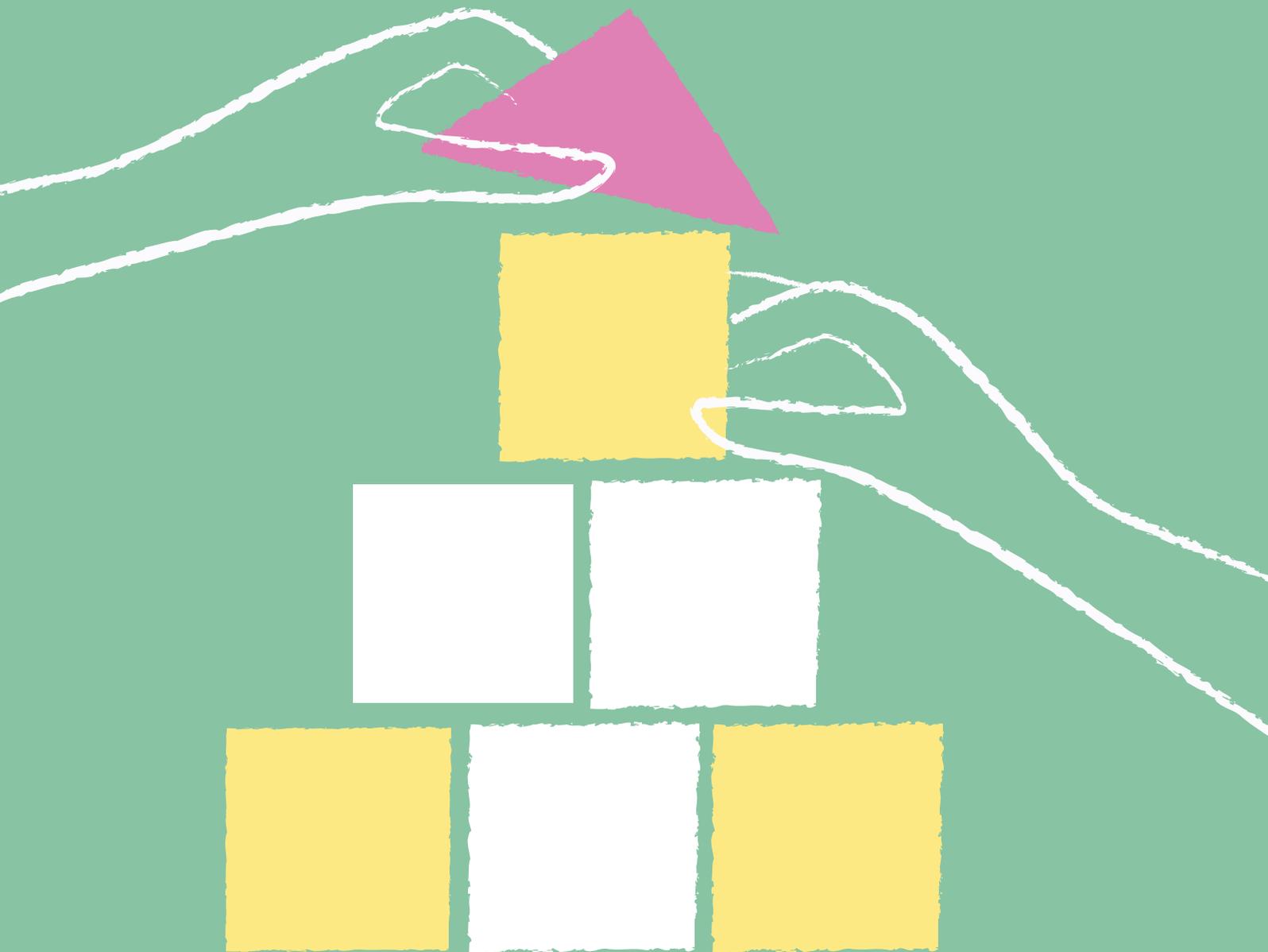
5.1 Overview

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 worker staffing in numerous regions. In these areas, staffing was considered inadequate to meet demands and deliver the appropriate quality of care. The challenges created by under-resourced social worker teams was further exacerbated by:

- Processes of induction, mentoring, and training being seen as insufficient

- Work unequally allocated or structured amongst available staff

- Social workers feeling they were being de-skilled with the high levels of administrative work

- Expertise, skills and specialist knowledge in silos within particular regions or teams

- Internal processes precluded rapid responses to addressing gaps in personnel, services, and therefore case management

- Internal transfers and transition out of fostering social work were attributed to pressurised, under-resourced work environs

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 skillsets 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 means that inappropriate placements are made and/or placements are unable to be maintained or break down due to poor, pressurised matching.

Relative carers comprise approximately 28%[2] of foster carers. Supports for newer foster carers and relative carers to enable them to develop in their new roles were also negatively impacted by strained social worker staff 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 (notably CAMHS), and GALs. In some instances, the lack of proficiency, experience, and/or expertise of these groups, combined with the fostering systems dependence on them were noted as having significant impact on all fostering stakeholders. Issues included severe delays in access to critical services, judicial orders perceived to be cumbersome, and failures to address situations of care holistically.

Capacity constraints were viewed as having a direct impact on the quality of supports and services; internally within social worker teams and externally for foster carers and the children in care. Most notably, consultation participants viewed these constraints as a key contributor to placement breakdown creating a cyclical effect that further increased the strain on stakeholders and the fostering system. It was a broadly held view that directing resources to the recommendations listed below 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.

2   Tusla's April 2016 Performance Dashboard

5.2   Suggestions to Inform Strategic Planning

There was support from all involved in the consultations for fostering to remain high on the national strategic agenda and within business planning processes. Continued efforts to be undertaken to ensure all national policies, strategies, and business plans are assessed for their impact on foster care.

5.2.1   Hire More Fostering Social Workers

Children in Care and Link social workers levels to be increased in line with a ratio based on active cases of children in care regionally, and the level of need in relation to cases, rather than legacy social worker numbers in each area.

5.2.2   Further Develop Social Worker Recruitment and Orientation Systems

Human resource management to be improved through the following:

- Recruitment campaigns and candidate sourcing to be nationally managed based on required qualifications, fostering interest, and location with local manager input into hiring processes

- Regional areas to be given the opportunity to request specific professional skills (mental health, occupational and play therapy experience) as required on local teams

- A new system to be introduced which allows for internal expressions of interest for open positions

- Time in job requirements, prior to an intra-team transfer to be set at a minimum 1.5 years, to create more stable workforces

- Improvements to be made to orientation processes, including induction periods, orientation training, and supportive supervision to account for the demanding and complex nature of the work

Status: In train (see Chapter 8 – 8.3.3)

5.2.3   Streamline Social Worker Replacement Processes

Institute a streamlined replacement process for planned leaves or resignations to remove barriers that inhibit qualified staff and external recruits from applying for roles. Consideration should be given to job sharing and long-term temporary staff conversions in order to conserve institutional knowledge and continuity. Engagement with Public Service Appointments Board and the state could be undertaken to quantify capacity costs of not appropriately and proactively filling open positions.

5.2.4   Budget for Replacements to Mitigate Delays in Hiring

Adopt an annual requisition process to support staffing stabilisation and mitigate delays in hiring. All new positions should go through the normal annual budgeting process for planning and approval. In the event that needs dictate hiring for a new position outside the planned budget, additional written business justifications and approvals will be needed on the job requisition form. The exact information to be provided by those submitting additional positions for approval requires additional clarity from Tusla.

The new requisition process would allow for 'replacement' requisitions for 'open' positions to be replaced more efficiently as Area Managers and or Principal social workers would not be required to create a business case for budgeted, open positions. Consideration to also be given to ensuring that maternity and long term leave cover have a similar, and equally efficient, process.

5.2.5   Clarify Aftercare Staffing

Efforts will be undertaken to clarify ambiguity in relation to the required qualifications of aftercare staff. This will ensure that aftercare workers' qualifications are understood, as is the policy in relation to these workers being able to work without social worker supervision.

Status: In train

5.2.6   Increase Foster Care Recruitment

A review of foster carer recruitment, assessment, and training to be undertaken by a multidisciplinary team and in partnership with IFCA to increase available foster carers. Regional good practice approaches to be identified and learning collected and shared in order to develop a strategic approach and set of supports which increase foster carer recruitment in each area.

The cultivation of national patrons (GAA or similarly situated organisation) and a new media campaign, which can be adapted regionally, to be actively considered.

Recruitment to be based on projected regional need, as well as specialist category foster carers (respite, emergency, and professional recruitment). It is recognised that the strategy will need to evolve to ensure regional guidance and the ability to localise to some degree while campaigning and resourcing the strategy at a national level. Review to also consider further development of special foster care panel for children who require a higher level of support following pilots in Galway and Dublin NE as well as the use of short term pre-placement preparatory centres (max six weeks) for children with highly complex needs to prepare them for fostering placement.

5.2.7 Improve Foster Care Review Processes

Ensure that there is an opportunity for in-person Foster Care review of supports and their experience after the 1st placement ends, or within a year of the first a child living with them, whichever comes first, and then every three years after this. In line with the national standards this is to be undertaken by a social worker unconnected to the foster carers local support structure and therefore to be independent. The review is a learning opportunity, where if desired by the foster carer, a support plan for development can be created in a collaborative fashion. Lessons for local offices to be collated annually and shared in a structured manner.

It is further recommended that regular support opportunities be developed by IFCA and Tusla for foster carers with less than two years' experience. This to consider peer support, more regular supervision and/or check-ins by link Social worker. The full implementation of this solution is predicated on each foster carer being allocated a link Social worker.

5.2.8 Create Training and Resource Centre for Foster Carers and Social Workers

Creation of an online training and resource centre in partnership with IFCA and other key stakeholders to synthesise and capture expertise and knowledge within the fostering system and enable stakeholders to effectively and efficiently access information 'just in time' in accessible formats such as short videos. It was suggested that training and resource centre to support overall knowledge and skill development of stakeholders and create opportunities to share good practice across the fostering system. The development of resource centre content to include the following:

- All laws, approved policies and processes

- A range of accessible, purpose-developed video clips on core topics for both Social Work teams and foster carers.

- Practical one page 'quick guidance' FAQs

- Process maps for key procedures

- Reference guides for core issues such as access, insurance, interaction with judiciary, GALs, CIC and foster carer reviews

- Research related to fostering and associated topics

- Available training course materials including where available videos and related resources

Consideration to be given by IFCA to the further rollout of the 'New Beginnings' course for children of foster carers, given the interactive nature of the envisioned on-line platform. Inclusion of material within the online centre is not intended as replacing existing in-person training but as a supplement to this and as a material repository for training courses, and an additional support for all foster carers and social workers.

Attention to be given to having a well-designed interface to ensure information and resources are: accessible (i.e. can be easily accessed by smartphone), searchable and user friendly. Development will be undertaken in partnership with IFCA to ensure the highest priority issues identified by foster carers are resourced and included.

Status: some aspects in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.3.2, 8.1.2, 8.5.5 and 8.56)

5.2.9 Address Delays in Mental Health, Health, and Social Services

A multi-disciplinary process to be established to develop solutions to address the significant delays in accessing mental health, health and social service for foster children. This process should engage mental health professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, and counsellors) as well as ensure access to other specialities such as paediatric, occupational therapy, disability, speech and language professionals. The goals of this interagency work should be to ensure expedient access and retention in relevant services. New processes should enable social workers to refer directly to appropriate services. Specifically, new agreements/processes or services should:

- Consider phone or home-visit counselling is available to foster children

- The creation of a specialised team for sexual abuse support

- Work with CAMHS to reduce barriers to service access for foster children and that their assessments and services are prioritised, are flexible, and local to foster family location

- Increase the availability of programmes for children dealing with grief, trauma and coping skills

- Urgently review the process for obtaining private services with an aim towards streamlining and eliminating barriers to critical services

- Create regional and national forums where social worker, foster carer and mental health professionals can engage in reflective practice, information sharing, and/or subject specific topical discussion groups

- Increase recruitment of specialised skills in local social worker teams (mental health, occupational and play therapy)

- Develop a joint training on self-harm and suicide for social worker and foster carers as well as foster carers and Foster Children to address the lack of sufficient supports, confidence and training on self-harm and suicide. CAMHS to be approached to explore partnership potential to provide Dialectic Behavioural Therapy in a joint foster carer and foster child training and/or workshop to support children's emotional and cognitive regulation.

Status: some aspects in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.5.1, 8.5.2 and 8.5.4)

### 5.2.10 Review and Adapt the Guardian Ad Litems System

A review of the Guardian Ad Litems (GALs) contracting arrangement through Tusla to be undertaken with a view to transferring GALs to the judiciary to ensure more comprehensive oversight and cost containment, with rates being readjusted to other comparative senior social worker roles. Consideration to be given to assessing cost savings and reallocating potential savings towards other urgent priorities as listed in this report. The outcome from the review should be a clarification of the GAL role in relation to professional standards, required experience, complaint processes, and court proceedings. Once clarified, information guides for foster carers, social workers, and children (age appropriate) to be developed about the GALs. It should be noted that this action is not within the current work remit of Tusla.

Status: a review in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.3.4)

5.2.11 Outreach Training for Statutory Partners

A specialised training outreach programme to be developed for statutory agencies including the judiciary. Training was considered important in relation to: the impact of trauma, behavioural indicators, practical considerations for access and assessments, and the impact of emotional abuse, neglect and multiple placements on children. Similarly, solicitors and barristers on the Tusla service panel to be trained on the following topics and their impact on children's wellbeing: issues of attachment, trauma, emotional abuse and neglect, how multiple placements and service delays can impact children, how the system can work to reduce trauma on children, and the value of engaging with foster carers prior to court appearances.

Training was considered important in relation to: the impact of trauma, behavioural indicators, practical considerations for access and assessments, the impact of emotional abuse, neglect and multiple placements on children.

6 FINDINGS: TECHNOLOGY
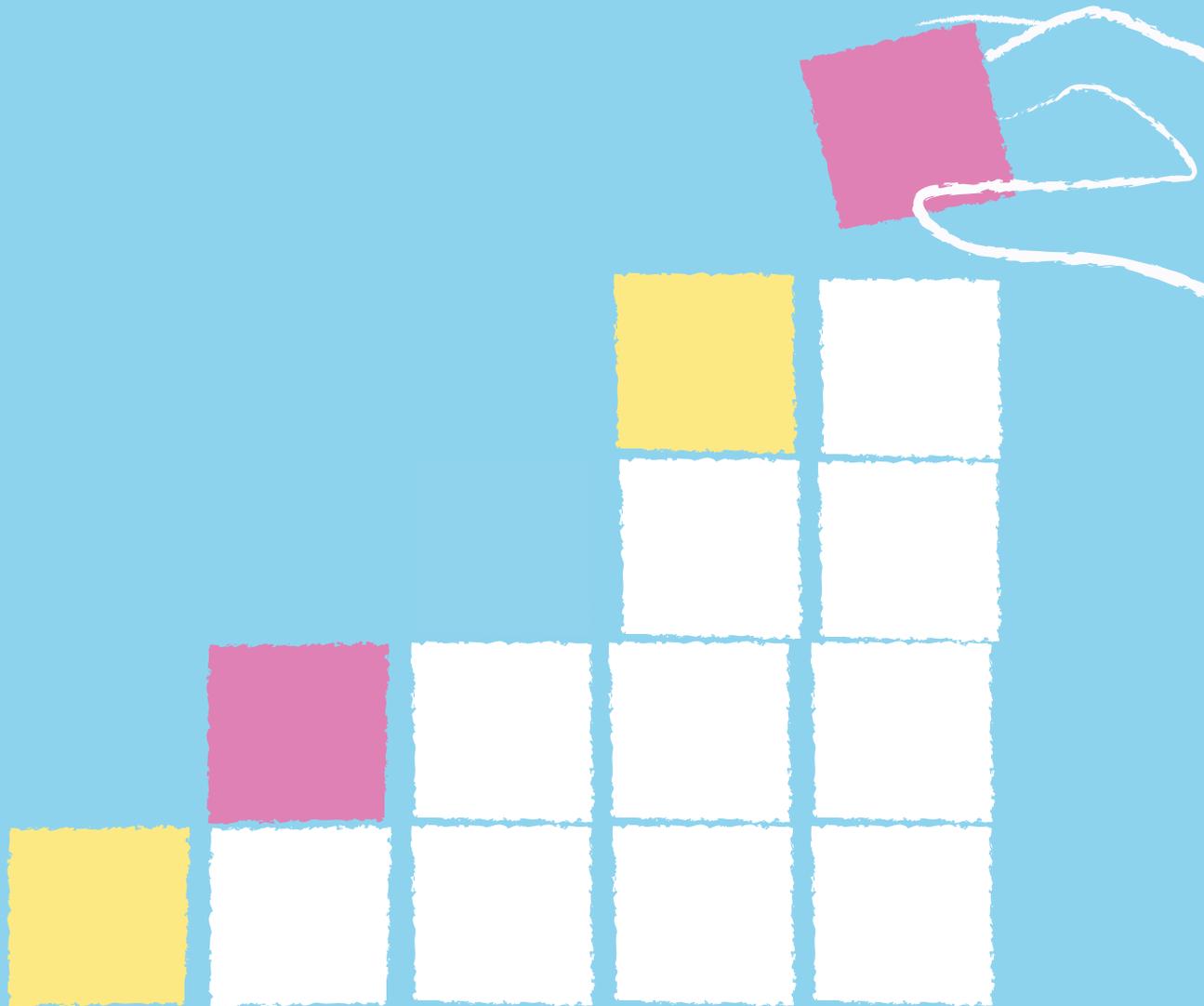
6   Findings: Technology

6.1   Overview

At the root of many of the challenges identified during consultations was the lack of an information management system to enable effective and efficient working. Social worker teams currently operate 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 with the current paper based fostering systems hamper access to, or critical assessment of, information in a timely fashion, 'views' into core issues requiring remediation, and proactive planning for both social worker teams and management.

Feedback from consultations was that any information and data management system needs to be designed around end user requirements. These requirements included storing key information relating to:

- A child's case specifics including history of care, including work with other social worker teams, past placements, issues, use of and links to external services (mental health, GP), and concerns

- Interactions with family of origin, judiciary, GALs, and other stakeholders

- Records of frequency of visits and actions taken by social worker members

- Records of access requirements, medical or health supports, visits, supports requested

- Foster carers in regional areas including their skills, knowledge, availability as well as history of past placements, trainings, and willingness to foster various types of placements

Additionally, consultations cited that the system should:

- Be accessible across social worker teams

- Streamline work by integrating with forms used (e.g. Preliminary Inquiry Form, Disruption Report, Case Complexity Management Tool, CIC and foster carer reviews)

- Proactively flag and notify for action on key pieces of work (e.g. CIC or foster carer reviews) to reduce administrative burden, and

- Increase coordination of placements and adapt as systems and processes change

- Be accessible out of office and during visits

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 required a technology solution. Knowledge and expertise critical to issues in fostering (sexual abuse, complex trauma, addiction, attachment etc.) are dispersed throughout the social worker 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 worker teams when they encountered a situation for which they were not prepared.

6.2   Suggestions to Inform Strategic Planning

6.2.1   Prioritise Information Management Systems

There will be a prioritisation of, and investment in, implementing a data and information management system that will address the items noted above to support and enable:

- Tusla management, administration, and local staff to have a comprehensive 'view' of the fostering system, measure quality components, proactively understand trends and appropriately plan

- Social workers to focus on core work of supporting positive fostering for children and foster carers effectively and efficiently

- Increased access, coordination and information sharing of pertinent child data across fostering and protection social worker teams

- Proactive case management and integrated working across fostering and social worker teams

- Development of tools to enable proactive planning for, and monitoring stability of placements

- A minimal administrative burden of social workers without sacrificing data requirements

- Tracking of foster carer information to facilitate

more timely communication about trainings, case notifications, updates and meetings

To ensure end-user workflow requirements are captured and enhance capacity, it is recommended that a consultative process be undertaken with front line staff. The system should be based on, and incorporate, existing good working practice in the field. Consideration should also be given to what information, reporting and data collection elements would support and enhance a deeper understanding of, and inform quality service delivery within, fostering.

Status: in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.4.1 and 8.4.2)

6.2.2   Effective Communication Tools

In some regions, out-dated communication tools and technologies are hampering social workers. Where this is the case, there should be a prioritisation of purchasing new equipment or solutions to ensure that all offices have efficient broadband/Internet access, phones (mobile and land), tele-conferencing, and reliable email facilities. This is of particular concern in more rural areas or where some offices are located in low standard rented facilities.

Social workers to focus on core work of supporting positive fostering for children and Foster carers effectively and efficiently.
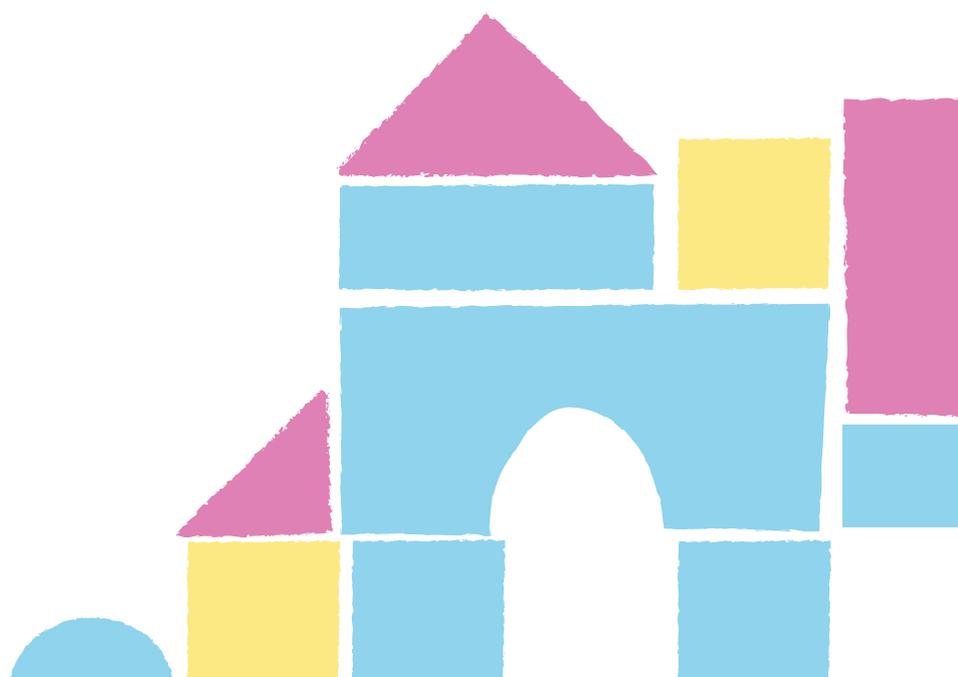
7 FINDINGS: SYSTEMS

7.1 Overview

Consultations identified areas where systems were less than optimal, impacting both service delivery and the ability to address stakeholders' needs. Key systems challenges listed below are inextricably linked to the policy, culture, capacity, and technology issues previously addressed.

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 processes, a need for more accessibility of meeting notes from CIC reviews, and when there were changes to care arrangements (access, allegations, judicial proceedings, potential disruptions etc.). For social workers, this included communications in relation to policy changes and appropriate escalation channels internally. For both key stakeholder groups, this included a clear understanding of expectations, assessment criteria/processes, and responsive feedback loops to ensure highlighted concerns were addressed in a transparent and timely fashion.

Performance review systems were also a significant point of feedback and touched not only on how foster carers and social workers were assessed but also on how the corporate infrastructure, namely training, human resources and finance were able to understand and respond to the needs of those 'on the front lines' (either social workers or foster carers) to ensure high quality service delivery. Performance management systems that aligned agency and individual goals with feedback loops for clients was also seen as an area for improvement.

7.2 Suggestions to Inform Strategic Planning

7.2.1 Quality Indicators for Internal Systems
Consideration should be given to the development of quality indicators for corporate services including: human resources, finance and other support services. The purpose of these indicators is to monitor that these services are provided in a timely and robust manner and to a high quality. Transparency in decision-making processes and timely responses to queries should be considered in the development of such indicators.

7.2.2 Information Collection Pre and Post Placement
Improve the way in which placement processes are undertaken, by:
- Ensuring that, to the greatest extent possible, foster carers have knowledge of, and agree to, access requirements prior to child being placed in their care
- Proactively identifying children who require additional support and working in partnership with foster carers to develop safety plans (possible scenarios and solutions) prior to the child transitioning. Avenues of out-of-hour supports to be made available to both foster carers and foster children.
- Standardise pre-placement planning meetings nationally for children to cover the following areas:
  - Child's history, needs and current circumstances
  - Access arrangements
  - Statutory agency and/ or judicial involvement

- Supports available to child and foster carer
- Potential issues, challenges
- Foster carers level of comfort and needed supports (including respite)
- Through the aforementioned review system, to anonymously collect and monitor feedback from foster carers after placement breakdown to develop a deeper understanding of the root causes, frequency and potential ways of mitigating placement breakdown
- Ensure foster Care reviews provide a simple but effective rating system for impacts on placement success e.g. how the child is within the foster carer home, foster carer comfort with placement and foster carer family dynamics since placement ....

7.2.3 Increase Access Facilities Provision
To create dedicated access facilities to facilitate supervised access in a child friendly environment wherever this is needed. Access facilities are present in a number of areas: an evaluation to see what works well may assist in the development of new facilities. Pilot and evaluate dedicated access workers to determine whether this role improves service provision and presents good value for money.

7.2.4 Establish After and Out of Hours Service Provision
Develop national standard requirements for out-of-hours social work service using best practice learning from regions that currently provide out-of-hours support services (nights and weekends). Resource this service. Consideration to be given to partnering with IFCA for out-of-hours helpline. Training

and clear referral pathways into after-hours statutory supports for emergency and crisis issues to be provided to operators.

Status: partially in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.5.8)

7.2.5 Guidance and Support Systems
Tusla and IFCA to further develop systems of communications to support service provision to foster carers, specifically on the following issues:

- Access to legal aid supports for questions or issues related to fostering including; allegations, notices to appear in court, and personal liability. Information on free legal aid options (Legal Aid services available in Ireland) to be provided on IFCA's website

- Guidance on requirements on insurance issues, i.e. how wilful damage can be managed and the inclusion of foster children on private medical insurance. Consideration will be given to IFCA exploring alternative options for reimbursement for damage and or negotiating additional insurance cover options with insurance providers in order to benefit foster carers

- Counselling to aid the management of challenging situations related to fostering; natural children of foster carers to be provided with supports also

- Planned breaks for foster carers as needed as part of a 'placement closure process' when a placement ends or breaks down which recognises and provides time for foster carers and children to address the impact of change prior to any new placement taking place

Status: partially in train (see Chapter 8 – 8.1.2, 8.1.3 and 8.5.6)

7.2.6 Children Without Documentation
Develop a system of enhanced support and guidance to social workers and foster carers caring for children lacking documentation (i.e. refugees). This support would include:

- Obtaining an emergency medical card

- Emergency funds being made available when child benefit cannot be accessed

- Emergency temporary PPS number to be made available to child

7.2.7 Unregistered Children Legislative Review
Undertake a review of current legal requirements and potential to develop better responses for unregistered children to include exploration of: a child's right to be registered with/without birth parental consent and a child being registered as part of the fostering process with Section 47 to be enacted as a last resort if birth

parent does not register child within three months of going into foster care.

7.2.8 Further Develop Sibling Placement System
Develop a system which, to the greatest extent possible, ensures that sibling groups are allocated one child in care social worker and the foster families are allocated one fostering link Social worker. This to be an operational expectation except in exceptional circumstances or where specialised skills are required by one of the siblings. Where this is not possible, social workers (child in care and link) to liaise with all foster carers involved on a regular basis to ensure better communication and information sharing between foster carers and Social Work teams.

7.2.9 Increase Support for Natural Children of Foster Carers
Foster carers recommended that their natural children be provided supports such as bereavement/grief counselling, particularly in cases where there is very little time given for a foster child to transition out of their home (court ordered cases). Tusla to review budgetary approval process for facilitate natural children of foster carers obtaining supports. Information for foster carers on how to access these services to be produced and disseminated.

7.2.10 Women/Children of Women with Substance Use Difficulties
A review to be undertaken of national supports for pregnant women with drug and alcohol issues to explore the functioning interagency protocols where there are no drug liaison midwifery services. Part of this service to be developed to also include:

- Exploring the creation of a national staff resource with skills and knowledge to support social worker and foster carer who care for babies with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome.

- Creating online training or resources for the social workers supporting and foster carers caring for children born with Neonatal Abstinence syndrome

It was recommended that child profile data is collected to support better understanding of the problem of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome and long-term effects on children on the children engaged with child protection or in care.

7.2.11 Communication with Gardaí
Establish regional quarterly liaison meetings between principal social workers and local Gardaí for section 12 removals to ensure communication and agreement on information sharing with children and foster carers.

8 DEVELOPMENT, PROGRESS & CHANGE – POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE SECTOR SINCE THE CONSULTATION
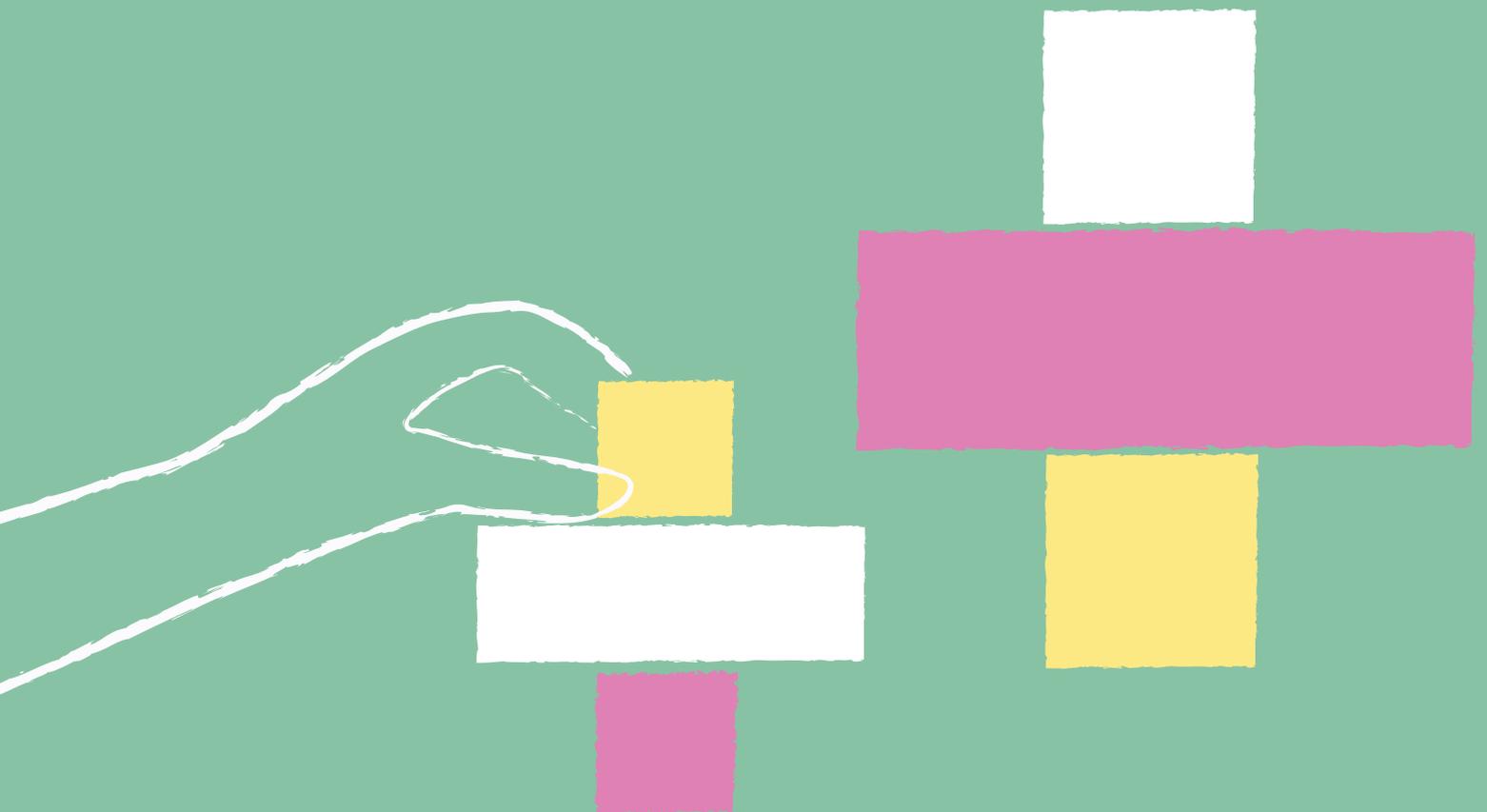
8.1. Overview

The report reflects the results of a consultation process that was exploratory in nature and aimed to examine foster carers' and social workers' perceptions of problems and suggested solutions in relation to the Irish foster care system. The consultation report represents a snapshot in time, reflecting the experience of participants up until late 2016.

A significant amount of work has been undertaken since the establishment of Tusla, and more recently since late 2016 when the consultations were undertaken. Many of these initiatives address the key challenges identified in this report and are being progressed with other organisations and state departments.

This chapter of the report identifies key new initiatives, which have been advanced since October 2016. This work can be considered a reflection of the commitment made to strengthening the provision of foster care. In addition to the developments outlined below, there is a large number of pilots that are occurring at more local or regional levels, which are not discussed here. However, following positive evaluation that indicate these pilots achieve cost effective outcomes, local developments may be considered for national rollout.

8.2 Culture

8.2.1 A six-month Leadership training programme is being provided to senior staff in Tusla. In 2017, the training will be rolled out to the second and third tranches of staff. This training is being rolled out on a phased basis. The leadership programme aims to provide people with the skills required to manage teams and change within complex environments.

8.2.2 A communications and collaboration policy between IFCA and Tusla will be developed in 2017; this will outline how the organisations work together to support quality service delivery in a co-operative manner. This policy will look at agreements in relation to communications, co-delivered training and workforce development - all areas highlighted in the consultations as having significant potential to improve supports to frontline social workers and foster carers.

8.2.3 IFCA has commissioned a structural review to identify how it can best serve the needs of its members at grass roots level as IFCA continues to grow and develop.

8.3 Policy

8.3.1 A Tusla National Policy Oversight Group has been established in 2016, it aims to: 1) Provide national oversight of policy development, 2) Make recommendations to Senior Management Team on all draft policies (there are several policies that address issues within this report that are in final draft phase and are awaiting finalisation) 3) Be a link between policies and operations, ensuring considered implementation plans are in place for all policies.

8.3.2 This group will be reviewing in detail the solutions proposed within this report, and identifying any that have not as yet been considered in the formulation of new policy.

8.3.3 Tusla's Aftercare Policy has been reviewed by the National Policy Oversight Group; the consultation process on this policy involved over 150 key internal and external stakeholders. It is planned for sign off and implementation in Q2 2017. The Aftercare Policy addresses the vast majority of themes that were raised under this chapter of the consultation report.

A significant amount of work has been undertaken since the establishment of Tusla, and more recently since late 2016 when the consultations were undertaken. Many of these initiatives address the key challenges identified in this report and are being progressed with other organisations and state departments.

8.3.4   A working group has been established to develop a National Access and Contact Policy. A plan for consultation on this document is underway which will include consultation with all key stakeholders. This policy will be made available to in Q3 2017.

8.3.5   Tusla's Allegations Against foster carers Policy has been redrafted and will be ready for consultation in Q2 2017. IFCA has produced a comprehensive guide on dealing with complaints and allegations to provide clarity, information and guidance on this topic. Information sessions are also being provided nationally by IFCA.

8.3.6   Tusla has undertaken a review of payments/ allowances in alternative care, in order to clarify practice and support preparation of a draft National Finance Policy for Alternative Care. Amendments following consultation are currently being worked on and this policy will be available in Q3 2017.

8.3.7   A Placements and Disruptions Policy has been finalised and is currently in implementation stage.

8.3.8   Enhanced allowance payments have been linked to respite, this development supports foster carers with complex needs to access respite without incurring financial penalties. This issue is clarified in the National Finance Policy for Alternative Care.

8.4   Capacity

8.4.1   New Social Work Positions are currently being advertised - Tusla budgets have increased in 2016 and 2017. Appointment of new social workers is currently underway. This will have a positive impact on the provision of foster care.

8.4.2   IFCA is currently in the process of creating a resource database, which will provide a range of accessible resources on issues relevant to foster care.

8.4.3   Tusla are developing a National Strategy on Recruitment and Retention of social workers. This is due to be completed in 2018 and will seek to address issues raised in relation to recruitment and retention within this report.

8.4.4   Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) are scheduled to undertake a review of the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) system, beginning 2017

8.5   Technology

8.5.1   NCCIS, Tusla's National Child Care Information System, is being rolled out across children's services.This system is currently being piloted in a number of geographical areas. The system will be used by social workers and allied services. The pilot will seek to address issues in relation to information management raised within this consultation. A pilot using tablet computers and supporting non-office based use of records and data in being undertaken in DNE (the Dublin North East region) area and will be reviewed in 2017.

8.5.2   IFCA has identified a need for the introduction of a Membership Management System (IT) to support the management of communications with members and support efficient and effective engagement with all stakeholders.

8.6   Systems

8.6.1   Two regions are currently piloting innovations in relation to the provision of therapeutic services to children in care (counselling and psychology services). If these pilots are successful, there is a Tusla commitment to extend this programme nationally over 2017.

8.6.2   Creative Communities Solution is a national pilot that is being launched in April 2017. This programme seeks to develop local committees which can utilise local budgets to develop wrap around, tailored support packages for children and young people to prevent them entering care and to prevent placement breakdown once in care. This programme will be externally evaluated in 2017 and rolled out in 2018 if successful.

8.6.3   While training needs assessments have been a regular feature of Tusla's planning, in April 2016 the CPD policy and strategy were launched, this was implemented on the 1st of December 2016. This strategy and policy seeks to address a number of the challenges related to training and continuous professional development.

8.6.4   The HSE and Tusla have developed a working protocol for children in care. This joint protocol outlines the key responsibilities for both organisations in responding to the needs of children within the care system. The protocol will include a commitment for HSE to attend the Interagency Steering Committees in Aftercare. This protocol provides a framework for resolving specific issues in relation to interagency co-ordination as, and when, these arise. An implementation

group involving HSE and Tusla will be developed to drive the implementation of the protocol.

8.6.5   IFCA is presently undertaking a review of existing learning resources for prospective foster families and will be developing new resources, training programme/s and training a panel of trainers to deliver these resources.

8.6.6   IFCA is expanding on its comprehensive suite of booklets and leaflets on a range of topics relevant to foster care. These are planned for launch in 2017 and 2018. Information sessions will also be rolled out nationally

8.6.7   The Children's Fora, coordinated by Tusla, are developing a guidebook/information leaflet to support young people in care who are transitioning between placements. The guide will be targeted at young people and carers.

8.6.8   Tusla is currently laying the foundations for an extension of after and out-of-hours services. This service will be extended to include foster care and Tusla has committed to the establishment of this nationally in 2017.

This list of recent developments indicates an organisational awareness of many of the issues raised within the consultation as well as a desire to address these in a strategic and considered way. The development of the Alternative Care Strategy provides an opportunity to explore any areas raised within the consultation that have not as yet been addressed.

Tusla is currently laying the foundations for an extension of after and out-of-hours services. This service will be extended to include foster care and Tusla has committed to the establishment of this nationally in 2017.

9 CONCLUSION

The consultation, which has informed this report, focused on the experiences of people who provide or support the foster care process in Ireland. This report reflects the views of over 300 foster carers, social workers, principal social workers and Area Managers throughout Ireland, as well as the views of many more professionals collected through survey.

The consultation process sought to provide Tusla and IFCA with a clear focus on how to strengthen existing services; it was also undertaken to inform the development of the Alternative Care Strategy. The report embodies participant concerns and aspirations for the fostering system and the vulnerable children that fostering serves. It is a snapshot in time from late 2015 to late 2016.

The enthusiastic engagement of foster carers and social workers in this process is a clear expression of the genuine commitment of these key stakeholders to working co-operatively to improve fostering relationships and experiences for children and families.

The detailed suggestions for change developed through this process and which are outlined in Chapter Three to Chapter Seven of this report, and the list of new developments in Chapter Eight attest to the fact that Tusla and IFCA are committed to listening to the voices of stakeholders and responding to these in a practical way wherever possible. New developments that have progressed since the consultations, go some way to addressing the issues raised within this report.

Collaborative work enabled the creation of this report - from consultations through to the dedicated work of the Oversight Group. The continuation and strengthening of collaboration is a central theme underpinning all report findings.

A number of suggestions within this report are resource dependent; this challenge needs to be managed at the strategic planning and implementation phases, and it is acknowledged that some issues in this report may necessarily be prioritised over others. It is also acknowledged that the suggestions provided in this report need to be considered alongside other inputs to the strategy, including the voice of birth parents, children in care and other professionals.

The suggestions in this report will be considered in the development of the new Alternative Care Strategy which aims to produce a pragmatic, ambitious and implementable action plan for the improvement of services and supports to foster care.
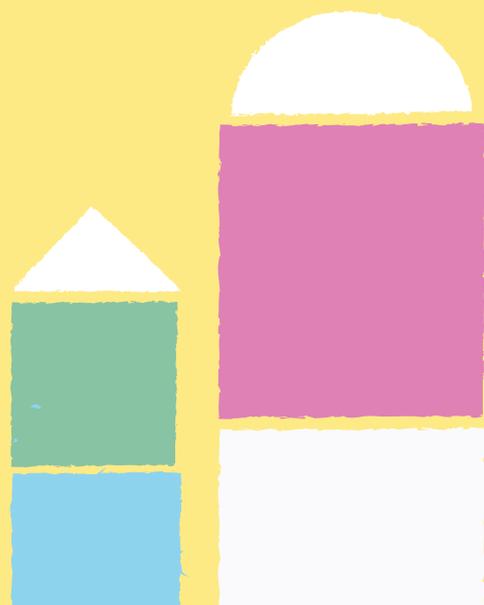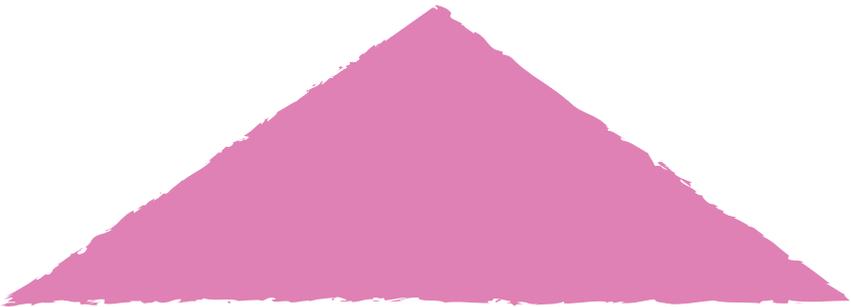
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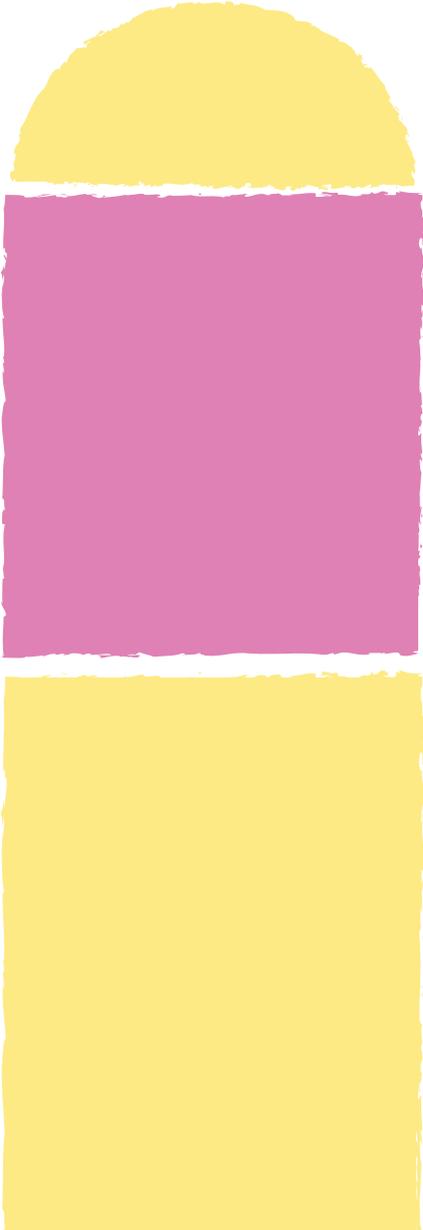
9   APPENDIX

This table outlines how solutions raised within the full discussion document have been themed into a smaller number of the solutions in this briefing document.

Executive Summary Chapter	Solutions in briefing document	Solutions from Full discussion document
Culture	2.2.1	12.3.1; 22.3.1, 8; 23.3.2, 5
	2.2.2	12.3.2; 22.3.1, 7, 8
	2.2.3	12.3.3; 22.3.8; 23.3.5
	2.2.4	11.3.5; 12.3.4; 22.3.1-2
	2.2.5	7.3.5
	2.2.6	11.3.3-4; 16.3.4
	2.2.7	7.3.3

Policy	3.2.1	9.3.1; 17.3.3
	3.2.2	5.3.1, 2, 5; 7.3.1, 4; 9.3.1, 2, 4; 10.3.4; 11.3.1-4, 6; 14.3.2, 6; 17.3.1-4, 7; 18.3.3; 19.3.1; 20.3.1, 3, 4; 22.3.5,6; 23.3.5
	3.2.3	7.3.1; 9.3.1; 17.3.1
	3.2.4	17.3.5, 6
	3.2.5	14.3.7; 17.3.9
	3.2.6	19.3.1-2

Capacity	4.2.1	22.3.1
	4.2.2	10.3.1; 22.3.3
	4.2.3	6.3.7; 22.3.4
	4.2.4	22.3.5
	4.2.5	22.3.6
	4.2.6	11.3.8
	4.2.7	10.3.1; 14.3.1, 3-5; 20.3.2; 22.3.1; 23.3.1
	4.2.8	7.3.2
	4.2.9	6.3.3; 8.3.3; 10.3.3; 16.3.2; 17.3.3, 6, 8; 18.3.3; 23.3.3, 4, 6
	4.2.10	6.3.1-2, 4-8,10; 8.3.5
	4.2.11	15.3.1-3
	4.2.12	5.3.6; 16.3.1, 3

Technology	5.2.1	5.3.3; 8.3.3, 4; 10.3.2; 11.3.7; 13.3.1
	5.2.2	13.3.2

Systems	6.2.1	22.3.2
	6.2.2	5.3.4; 8.3.7; 10.3.8
	6.2.3	5.3.6
	6.2.4	5.3.7
	6.2.5	8.3.1, 2, 6
	6.2.6	9.3.3; 10.3.6; 14.3.6; 18.3.1, 2
	6.2.7	17.3.2
	6.2.8	21.3.1
	6.2.9	10.3.7
	6.2.10	6.3.9
	6.2.11	23.3.1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Tusla and IFCA would like to thank all who enthusiastically contributed to this consultation process, through completion of surveys or attendance at focus groups. We are grateful for the time that every foster carer, social worker, Principal social worker and Area Manager gave to this process. Without your insight and dedication to foster care, this report could not have been developed.

We would like to thank the members of the Oversight Group who spent many hours reviewing the information from the consultations and supported the translation of this information into a succinct report that provides practical and realistic suggestions for change within the sector.

Thanks also to Quality Matters who provided consistently professional supports throughout this process and challenged us to make the process as engaging, transparent and meaningful as possible.

It is our hope that the future influence of this work on the sector will validate the commitment and time of all involved in creating it.

Endnotes

1 U.K, €159.60 - €280.25 (www.pridefostering.com/fostering-allowances/): USA - €11.68 – €37.12, per day, depending on state and level of need (http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Foster-Care-Payment-Rate-Report.pdf): Australia €117.86 – €480.44, per week, depending on age and level of need (http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/): NZ - €86.74 - €121.43, per week, depending on age of the child(http://www.cyf.govt.nz/documents/info-for-caregivers/becom-ing-a-caregiver/fact-sheet-caregivers-allowance.pdf): Czech Republic - €166.40 - €244 per month, depending on the age of the child (http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1106&intPage-Id=2487&langId=en)