

Factors associated with continuation and discontinuation of foster carers in Ireland

The current project was commissioned under the Department of Children, Disability and Equality's Care Experiences Programme, a research and data programme examining the lives of children in care and adults who were in care as children. This specific study aimed to examine the factors that influence foster carers' decisions to continue or discontinue their fostering role within the Irish foster care system.

Three key research questions were identified:

- What factors support foster carers to continue fostering or influence foster carers decisions to withdraw from fostering?
- Are there differences between different foster carer groups based on length of service: categorised as 1 year or less; from 1 to 5 years and, greater than 5 years?
- Are there distinctive differences between these three groups in relation to factors such as: a) expectations versus reality of fostering; b) training and support; c) professional and personal relationships and d) meeting the foster child's needs?

Four interrelated data collection methods were used: a scoping review of the existing relevant literature; a quantitative survey of 120 Tusla-approved foster carers; thirty individual interviews with survey participants; and nine focus groups involving twenty-eight foster care staff working in fostering.

SCOPING REVIEW:

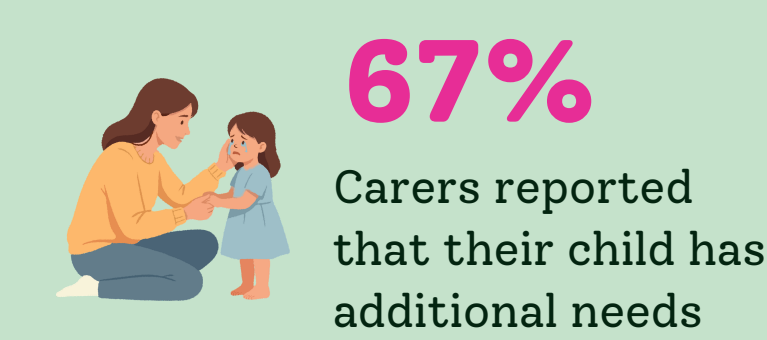
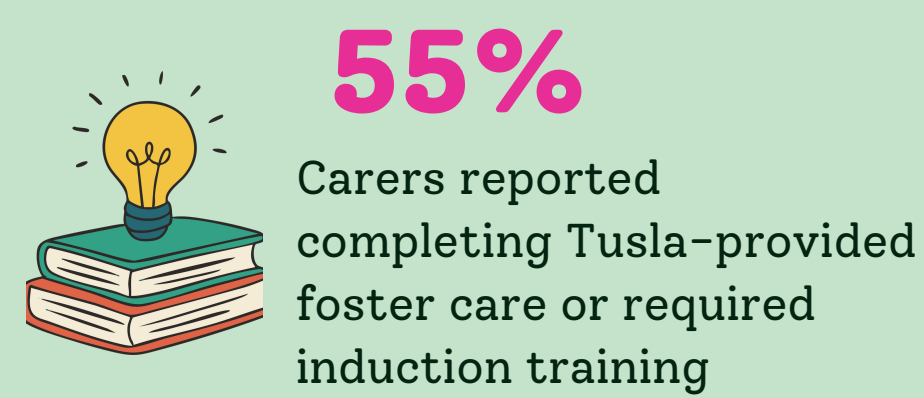
- 33 research studies were included for analysis in the scoping review
- Continuation and discontinuation factors were identified across 4 different system levels: the foster carer themselves, the child, the service/agency, and the family/wider community.
- **The main continuation factors identified were:** the relationship with & commitment to the child; personal skills and competences to manage stress; positive relationship & communication with foster service workers; and adequate support from the service/agency, family, friends and peers.
- **The main discontinuation factors identified were:** a strained, challenging relationship with foster service workers; feeling dismissed and disregarded "not part of the care team"; challenges being able to provide for the child, particularly with high needs; and lack of support from the service/agency, family, friends and peers; and ongoing stressors leading to burnout

SURVEY:



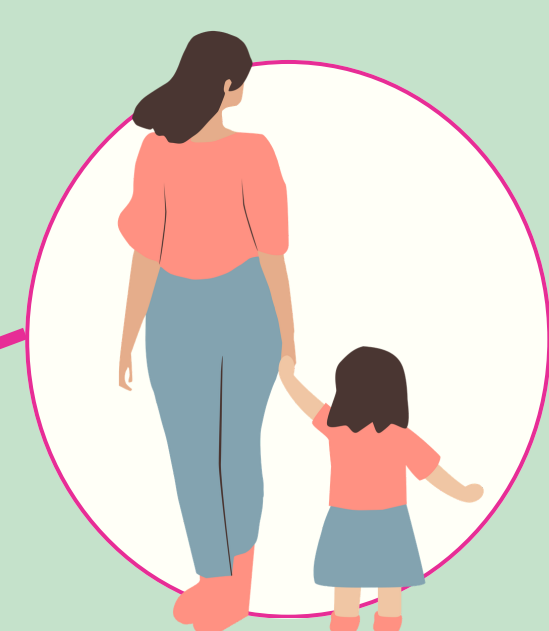
Respondents:

There were 120 respondents to the national survey – respondents were from all over Ireland, with 30% from the Dublin Mid-Leinster region. Demographic information recorded that 87% of respondents were female, and were predominantly 45–54 years old. 93% of respondents identified as White Irish and 80% were married or in a civil partnership.



Challenges:

- Emotional strain & burnout
- Limited support received
- High social worker turnover
- Poor communication with social worker
- Feeling disempowered in the system
- Grief of child leaving their home
- Managing demands of caring for children with trauma & additional needs



Protective factors:

- Positive, loving relationship with their child
- Good relationship with their social worker & other professionals
- Adequate support & communication from social worker/fostering service
- Support from partner, family & friends
- Peer support from other foster carers

INTERVIEWS:

30

foster carers were interviewed to gain a more in-depth qualitative understanding of their experiences, their consideration of discontinuing, and their decisions to remain fostering

Themes emerging:



- Foster carers: early experience, recognition and voice
- Meeting the needs of the child in care within the family context
- Support structures
- Relationships, communication and information sharing



Love & bond
Commitment to the child



Sense of
purpose & belief
in work as a
foster carer



Support from
social workers
& others



Lack of support &
feeling
overwhelmed



Burnout &
emotional
strain



Difficulty meeting
child's needs

Why carers remain fostering:

Why carers consider leaving:

FOCUS GROUPS:



28 professionals took part in the focus groups to understand the professional perspective of the foster carer experience, and what factors they believe contribute to continuation and discontinuation.

Professionals who participated were: 7 Social workers; 7 Fostering link workers; 6 Peer support workers; and 8 Guardian ad litem

Continuation factors:

- Emotional connection to the child
- Continuity of a positive, communicative relationship with trusted foster care staff member
- Feeling respected, listened to & included in decision-making for the child



Discontinuation factors:

- Lack of recognition & voice, poor communication, carers feel dismissed and disregarded by their fostering care workers & within in the system
- Strained relationship & disagreements with fostering care workers
- Cumulative emotional exhaustion & carers experiencing burnout
- Fear of allegations, managing complex access agreements with child's birth family



Recommendations:



- Professionals need to recognise, respect & listen to carers, and include them in the decision-making process
- Improve detailed, trauma-informed training for carers, particularly for those with caring for children with high needs
- Review & reform the allegation process
- Improve staffing to increase stability of support & relationships
- Review the financial & structural supports across regions
- Improve the access to supports and create peer support structures