

Introduction

Chairperson, Committee Members, on behalf of EPIC (Empowering People in Care), I thank you for the invitation to address the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs this morning. My name is Karla Charles and I am the Policy Manager in EPIC. I am accompanied by my colleague, Fidelma Guinan, Advocacy Officer in EPIC.

EPIC is an independent organisation established to advocate with, and on behalf of, children and young people in care and with care experience.¹ A core part of the work of EPIC is the provision of an individual advocacy and support service for children and young people with care experience. The policy section seeks to make positive change for children and young people in care and with care experience at a national level.

EPIC welcomes this opportunity to discuss issues of Foster Care with the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs today and we thank you for the opportunity to be part of this dialogue.

Fostering is caring for someone else's child in one's own home – providing family life for a child who cannot live with his/her own birth parents, either on a short or long term basis. We are very fortunate that the majority of children in the care of the state live with foster carers, are well looked after, are happy and do well in school. There are currently over 6,200 children in care, of which there are about 4,100 in foster care. A substantial number of these children (1,715) are cared for by their extended family in what is commonly referred to as relative foster care.² Best practice dictates that it is important to care for a child who cannot live at home to be placed as close to their birth family and community as possible. Priority should be given to the placement of siblings together, in relative foster care or within their local community, unless this is inappropriate given the assessed needs of the children.

¹ See www.epiconline.ie for more information.

² Tusla, Monthly Management Data Activity Report December 2016; available here : http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla_Monthly_Management_Data_Activity_Report_December_2016.pdf [accessed 24.05.17].

Main issues

EPIC would like to draw your attention to a number of issues that we feel merit further attention. These issues have been brought to our attention through our direct advocacy work with children and young people in care:

1. Cost of Private versus Child and Family Agency (Tusla) registered fostering:

There are a number of Private foster care organisations operating in Ireland. Placing a child through one of the Private foster care organisations costs the state an average of €58,000 per child per year versus €17,900 for children fostered with foster carers registered directly with Tusla.³ EPIC would encourage the Committee to look into the disparity of cost between private providers and state agencies.

2. Placement Breakdowns:

Placement breakdowns are sometimes inevitable, but in order to learn from such breakdowns there needs to be greater oversight on the number of placement breakdowns, the reasons for the breakdowns, and what could be learnt from such breakdowns. It is imperative that such data be collected and analysed as a matter of priority.

Placement breakdowns should be challenged; in EPIC's experience some breakdowns can and should be avoided. Lack of training and poor management of difficult behavioural situations can lead to damaged relationships. In foster families this can sometimes result in placement breakdown. More consistency needs to occur when matching the needs of the child with the strengths and abilities of the foster carers. Unfortunately, this does not always occur. Adequate supports must also be provided to children and foster families to ensure that stability and placements are maintained, where possible.

³ Gartland, F.; 2016; Private Foster Care is Three Times More Expensive; *Irish Times* [online]; 19 Sept. Available at <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/private-foster-care-is-three-times-more-expensive-figures-show-1.2796078> (accessed May 24 2017).

3. Ending a foster care placement:

Many foster families have lifelong relationships with the children that they foster even after the children leave their home, but some placements unfortunately come to abrupt endings. EPIC believes there should be built in support mechanisms to prevent this from occurring, and that where it does, young people are supported through this difficult transition.

Children approaching their 18th birthday are particularly vulnerable because they are going through a lot in their own lives from sitting leaving cert exams, to aging out of the service. They may be pushed to make independent decisions with little support or preparation. EPIC has experienced several cases of children approaching their 18th birthday and having to abruptly leave their foster placements and move back in with their birth parents, who were previously deemed unsuitable carers. The fact that such decisions cannot be challenged or that supports or interventions did not occur at an earlier stage is unacceptable. All children experience difficulties and challenges during their teenage years, particularly in the home setting, but these can be more difficult for children and young people in care. Such problems should be pre-empted and relevant supports provided to avoid the tragic abrupt ending of placements at a crucial time in a young persons' life.

4. Specialised Carers:

EPIC is aware that Tusla runs targeted recruitment drive for specialised carers. Similarly, training for foster carers does occur but it is EPIC's opinion that more of it should be of a compulsory nature, particularly in relation to specialist training. EPIC recommends that Tusla develop a training module on LGBTI issues, for example. The need for such training is evident through our advocacy work, and our publication on this issue entitled 'Coming Out in Care' which was a collaborative piece of work between EPIC & BeLongTo was extremely well received. More consistent support of targeted recruitment of foster carers would be very beneficial, as children placed in foster care often have specific needs.

5. An increase in younger children going into residential care:

Through our practice, EPIC has noticed that there is an increasing number of younger children under the age of 12 years being placed in residential care. We are aware of 9, 10 and 11 year olds being placed in residential care. While there was a dip in the number of younger children going into residential care for a number of years, this appears to have reversed of late. There was a clear practice by Tusla not to place children under the age of 12 years in residential care because it was deemed inappropriate. It would be of great concern to EPIC if this was no longer the case.

6. Over reliance on Voluntary Care:

If a child is in care under a voluntary care agreement, Tusla must consider the parents' wishes in relation to how aspects of the care are provided. It is EPIC's opinion that a child who has been in care for a number of years, should have their voluntary care agreements reviewed and a decision should be made as to whether or not it is in the child's best interest to remain on a voluntary care agreement or if a full care order should be sought. The birth parents of children on voluntary care agreements can adversely disrupt the lives of their children in foster care, and there are instances where the mothers and fathers, often due to their own personal difficulties, may seek to disrupt their child's foster care placement. Keeping children on voluntary care agreements in the longer term does not provide the child with a sense of security or permanency in their foster care placement. The following are examples of where birth parents sought to exert control over the lives of their children and the foster family, causing disruption to the detriment of the care placement:

- A mother insisting that permission should have been sought from her before giving her daughter a birthday cake on her 3rd birthday.
- A mother insisting the foster carers use her buggy and not the one they already had.
- A mother refusing to allow her son's very long hair to be cut.
- A mother refusing to sign passport forms because she didn't want her child going on his first holiday abroad with the foster family.

7. Greater supports for birth parents:

Parents of children growing up in foster care have been a largely neglected group in policy, practice and research, in spite of the fact that these parents are often vulnerable adults who experience a profound loss and threat to their identity. Parents' involvement through contact is also likely to have an impact on children's stability and security in the foster family. Birth parents should receive greater support in dealing with the trauma of having their child taken into care, as well as learning coping mechanisms to help them to focus their attention on what is in the best interests of their child.

8. Foster Care Reviews:

The recently published HIQA inspection report of Dublin South Central (MON-001835) found that foster care reviews were *"not taking place as required and this presented a significant risk. Regular reviews of foster carers to assess their continuing capacity to provide high quality care and to assist with the identification of gaps in the service were not occurring. Reviews were not occurring following serious incidents, complaints, allegations or indeed placement breakdowns, and information on such incidents was not routinely notified to the foster care committee. Data submitted to HIQA said that six foster care reviews had taken place in the 12 months prior to inspection, 15 in the three years prior to inspection and 161 foster carers (60%) had not undergone a review in the last three years as required. (p27)"* This is unacceptable, and reviews should occur sooner and more regularly, to ensure that the child is being well looked after and that any difficulties are overcome before they escalate.

9. Consistency in quality across the country:

All children and their foster families should be treated equally in terms of the minimum level of supports that they receive, unfortunately this does not always occur with some people receiving a better level of support than others. Where children require extra interventions the foster families should be supported in providing these. EPIC recommends that Tusla is adequately funded to have the full complement of staff nationally and that staff receive adequate training to provide these interventions.

10. Complaints Management/ Information:

All young people should know that they are entitled to make a complaint, and how to go about making one. DCYA developed a fantastic resource known as TACTIC (Teenagers And Children Talking In Care) packs, which should be distributed to every child in care. These packs are a tremendous resource for children in care, be it residential or foster care.

Fifteen Fora have been set up around the country by EPIC with the support of Tusla, to hear the voice of the child in care. These are proving to be a great success. One Fora with 11 children and young people, based in Donegal, is creating and producing a booklet that will be given to all Foster Carers to fill in prior to a new child or young person moving into their home. The booklet contains questions and information that young people feel is needed to help support them in moving to a new placement and to alleviate some of the stress and anxiety about the move. Some of the questions in this booklet are:

- Do you go to mass and, if so, is this expected of me?
- If there is wifi, what's the code?
- Who visits the house regularly that doesn't live there?
- Can I decorate my room myself?
- Is the house in the country or in a town?
- Do I get extra pocket money if I do chores?
- Can I go to events like discos or school trips?
- What activities, sports clubs or youth clubs could I join?
- What are the top 5 house rules?

11. Sibling access:

Where possible siblings are placed together in a foster family, but this is not always possible, especially with larger families. A good level of access with a sibling is considered to be one visit a month, perhaps for a few hours at a time. This is not, in our opinion, nearly enough time on which to build a strong and lasting relationship with a

sibling. Siblings should be placed within a maximum radius in order to maximize the opportunity for sibling contact; this is of particular significance in rural foster care placements. Financial considerations should not be a limiting factor in maximising sibling contact. This contact is invaluable and must be given greater focus.

12. Improved co-ordination of Tusla services, HSE disability services and CAMHS:

EPIC has had experience of several cases where situations were allowed to reach a crisis level before funding was found by the HSE disability services to provide full-time disability support for a young adult leaving care. It is very welcome that Tusla and the HSE have recently agreed a *Joint Protocol For Interagency Collaboration between the health service Executive and Tusla Child and Family Agency to Promote the Best Interests of Children and Families*.⁴ The new *Child Protection and Welfare Strategy* clarifies and sets out the respective roles, duties and legal requirements of the HSE and Tusla in relation to children and vulnerable adults with a disability or mental health issue.⁵ This will help to address many of the co-ordination difficulties and will improve interagency working between Tusla and the HSE. The Strategy is a central part of Tusla's on-going programme of transformation and includes a new national approach to practice, the Signs of Safety. EPIC looks forward to seeing the impact of such developments on the ground.

13. Flexibility within the system:

Provisions should always allow for exceptions and flexibility if it is deemed in the best interest of the child. For example, a partner of a relative (Sue) who had a good relationship with a child (Luke) was only allowed to foster Luke after he had spent an unsuccessful year in a residential home, and after repeated requests by Luke to live with Sue. At first, Sue had been deemed an unsuitable carer due to her older age. Luke finally

⁴ Tusla, *Joint Protocol for Interagency Collaboration between the Health Service Executive and Tusla Child and Family Agency to Promote the best interests of Children and Families*; March 2017; available at: http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/HSE_Tusla_Joint_Working_Protocol_v_1.0_March_2017_Signed.pdf (accessed 25.05.17)

⁵ Tusla, *Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-22*; 22.05.17; available at <http://www.tusla.ie/news/tusla-launches-new-child-protection-and-welfare-strategy> (accessed 25.0517).

moved in with Sue and has found a home for life. It would have been preferable had Luke been able to move in with Sue in the first instance, thereby avoiding an unhappy year in residential care and unnecessary trauma.

14. Positives:

We have highlighted many of the challenges around foster care that have been brought to our attention through the course of our advocacy work, however we would also like to acknowledge the positive developments that have, and are, occurring in foster care in areas such as cultural awareness and identity. These improvements should be highlighted and EPIC would like to acknowledge all the positive work being done by foster families, foster care organisations, IFCA, Tusla and the social workers working directly with these children and families. I thought I would close our presentation with a few quotes from children and young people about the positives of foster care:

"I have two families"

"My foster brother is funny"

"There is another foster child here"

"Having someone to talk to"

"Getting more presents"

"Someone else to talk to"

"Having no worries and feeling safe"

"Knowing someone is there for you when things go wrong"