The impact of austerity measures on client’s lives

Foster Carers are a critical resource and are our partners in providing essential protection services to children in need of state care. Promoting the quality of foster care is a key social work function which requires adequate staffing and funding.

Austerity measures have impacted on staffing levels and the ability of social workers to provide important supports and meet a range of National Standards for Foster Care—65% of Foster Carers had a link Social Worker to support them, but 35% did not.

Inadequate staffing levels mean that heavier, more complex case loads are reducing the service to some clients.
In some areas educational supports for children with additional needs have been reduced or withdrawn.

Social Workers are under increased pressure to recruit greater numbers of Foster Carers while resource levels to support new carers have not increased.

Impact on the social work role

Post Adoption Support services are currently inadequate.
Concerns that policy in respect of developments in adoption practices may reflect the need for cost containment rather than addressing the best interest of the child.
Availability of day fostering as a valuable resource for supporting some families is being curtailed due to funding considerations.

“We live in an atmosphere of uncertainty; we are not confident that we will continue to receive necessary supports for the children in our care. We often find that supports have to be negotiated, and pleaded for, rather than being accepted as an entitlement for the benefit of the child.” (Foster Carer)

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Insufficient and inconsistent monitoring, support and supervision of Foster Carers posed a risk to the stability of children’s placements.
(HIQA Inspection Report 2012 DNW)

Partnership initiatives between Social Workers and Foster Carers have been undermined. Foster Carers who have contributed to the preparation of new foster applicants are thus left to feel undervalued as a result of withdrawal of funding.

The number of home-visits that we undertook in the past will be dramatically reduced” (Statement from HSE to Foster Carers reported in The Kerryman, 27 May 2009)
A social worker supervising a child’s placement illustrated the above:

“Limitations placed on the travel allowance has reduced our ability to make home visits, thereby reducing direct contact which is essential to build an effective working relationship and this is happening at a time when support for training, and other interventions are also reduced.”
Children returning home are sometimes cast adrift due to reductions of support services in the community

“The findings from the inspection of foster care services in Limerick were extremely positive with standards in relation to rights, placements, and team qualifications being met in full. It is evidence of the standard of service that can be delivered while improvements are an ongoing process.”
—Website of Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Social workers were found to be committed and motivated and most had a good understanding of the needs of the children in foster care.”
(HIQA Inspection Report 2012 DNW)

Innovations and initiatives in social work responses to austerity cuts and measures

Individual workers have created their own responses to minimise the extremes of the impact of austerity measures. These responses include

- more group working opportunities where possible
- shared travel arrangements
- more carers and children seen in the office where appropriate
- more telephone / email contact

The social work department struggles with the contradictions inherent in trying to ensure ethical, client centered practice in the context of an agency agenda that is driven by cost containment and cutbacks. However there is increasing emphasis on family- based and community based resources - possibly informed by empowerment practice as well as by cutbacks. This is given expression in

- Family Welfare Conferences
- increase use of relative foster care
- engagement with the voluntary and community sector to address needs

The Minister welcomed the HIQA report into foster care services in Limerick. (February, 2012)

“I am glad to note the findings from an inspection of Foster Care services in Limerick. These findings are generally positive with standards in relation to rights, placements, and team qualifications being met in full. It is evidence of the standard of service that can be delivered while improvements are an ongoing process.”
—Website of Department of Children and Youth Affairs

SWIFC members with Minister Fitzgerald at Foster Care Conference in Castlebar, May 2012