

Chapter 15

Foster care

15.01 Foster care, previously known in Ireland as ‘boarding out’ or ‘at nurse’, is a form of out-of-home care that allows for a child to be placed in a family environment rather than an institution. Foster care has been provided over the years through the State and non-government sectors, and by both formal and informal private arrangements. Funding for these placements was generally made to the foster parents by the organisation responsible for the placement or by the child’s relatives. Foster care arrangements, including the assessment of potential foster carers, the supervision of foster placements, and payment allowances for children in foster care have been standardised and become better regulated in recent years.

Witnesses

15.02 The Confidential Committee heard evidence from 24 witnesses, eight male and 16 female, who reported being abused while in foster care. The reports related to 22 foster care placements. The witnesses identified 18 foster families by name and location, four others were referred to by their geographic location. Two (2) of the 18 named foster families were each reported as abusive by two separate witnesses.

15.03 The reports of abuse in foster care refer to a 64-year time period between 1931 and 1995, being the years of earliest admission and the latest discharge reported by witnesses. The majority of reports of abuse in foster care refer to placements before 1960. Sixteen (16) witnesses, four male and 12 female, were originally placed in foster care prior to 1960 and 12 of those witnesses, three male and nine female, were also discharged before 1960. Five (5) of the witnesses who reported abuse were discharged from their foster care placements in the 1980s and 1990s.

15.04 Seven (7) witnesses, five male and two female, reported abuse in other placements in addition to foster care, including Industrial Schools, Children’s Homes, a special needs school, and a primary school. Witness evidence regarding those accounts is reported in the relevant chapters of this Report.

15.05 Twelve (12) of the foster homes reported were in rural locations and 10 were in cities and provincial towns.

Social and demographic profile of witnesses

15.06 The majority of witnesses reporting abuse in foster care were the children of single parents and had scant information about their family background and social circumstances. They generally knew little about their family of origin and were reliant on official documentation for details of their place of birth and early life experiences. This documentation was most often reported to have been obtained through Freedom of Information legislation, family tracing services and other charitable organisations.

- 15.07** Family of origin, place of birth and current residence details are differentiated by gender when there are notable differences; otherwise they are reported collectively.
- 15.08** Twelve (12) of the 24 witnesses reported that they were born in Dublin, 11 witnesses were born in eight other Irish counties and one witness was born outside the State.
- 15.09** Fourteen (14) witnesses reported that their mothers were unmarried at the time of their birth. Three (3) female witnesses reported being the children of extra-marital relationships who were placed in foster care as infants by mothers who reared other children within marriage. A further three witnesses reported not knowing anything about the circumstances of their birth.
- 15.10** Four (4) witnesses reported being placed in foster care in the context of marital separation or parental illness.
- 15.11** Ten (10) witnesses reported having siblings, some of whom they had contact with during their childhood and others who they have only become aware of in recent years through the process of family tracing. Nine (9) of these witnesses reported having siblings in care. Two (2) of those witnesses reported being initially placed from their family homes in the same foster home as their siblings with whom they maintained contact. Five (5) of the witnesses reported that they and their siblings had been placed in out-of-home care because their mothers were lone parents and unable to support them due to their social and economic circumstances.
- 15.12** Eight (8) witnesses had never been able to establish whether or not they had any siblings or other living relatives and six witnesses reported that they had no siblings.
- 15.13** Witnesses had relatively little information about their parents' occupational status, which in 13 instances was reported as unskilled and in 11 instances was recorded as unknown.
- 15.14** At the time of their hearing the age of witnesses who reported being abused in foster care ranged between 20 and 74 years. Ten (10) witnesses were aged over 60 years at the time of their hearing. A further nine witnesses were aged between 40 and 59 years and five others were under 40 years of age.
- 15.15** At the time of their hearing 19 witnesses were living in Ireland and five were resident in the UK.

Circumstances of placement in foster care

- 15.16** Twenty (20) of the 24 witnesses had been in foster care or institutional care since their first year of life. As previously stated, most of these witnesses were the children of lone mothers who were reported to be unable to care for them for various reasons.
- 15.17** Four (4) witnesses reported that they lived with their parents for the first few years of their lives but were then placed in foster care following family breakdown, parental illness or marital separation. These witnesses were initially admitted to Children's Homes, Industrial Schools or other institutions with siblings from whom some were then separated.
- 15.18** Among those witnesses who reported being in out-of-home care for lengthy periods, seven witnesses reported that their placement in foster care followed a series of other placements over a period of up to seven years. These witnesses reported being in Children's Homes, county homes, hospitals or Industrial Schools for varying periods of time prior to being placed in foster homes that, in most instances, became their final childhood residence. All of these witnesses were the children of lone mothers with whom they reported having no further contact.
- 15.19** Seven (7) other witnesses were fostered before their first birthday from the institutions where they had been born, including county homes, mother and baby homes and nursing homes.

- 15.20** Six (6) witnesses reported being transferred to foster homes from different placements, including other foster homes, where they had been happily settled over a number of years. Two (2) of the six witnesses reported being placed with foster families following the closure of the residential institutions where they had lived for many years.
- 15.21** Twenty (20) witnesses reported spending between 11 and 18 years in foster care and other forms of institutional care. Five (5) of those witnesses continued to live with their foster families after the age of 18 years in circumstances that are referred to later in this chapter under the heading of current experiences.
- 15.22** Three (3) witnesses reported being fostered and in other forms of alternate care for between eight and 10 years. Two (2) of those witnesses gave accounts of being adopted by their foster parents. The third witness was transferred from an abusive foster placement to an institutional setting. A fourth witness reported being in foster care for less than a year prior to being returned to their biological family.

Record of abuse

15.23 Eight (8) male and 16 female witnesses who reported being abused in foster care made reports in relation to 22 different foster homes. As stated above, the reports relate to a 64-year period between 1931 and 1995, and refer to all four types of abuse, physical and sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse. Reports of abuse by a witness may be either descriptions of a single incident of abuse or multiple experiences of being abused over a long period of time. In most instances witnesses who reported abuse in foster care made reports that referred to more than one incident of abuse and more than one type of abuse. The most frequently reported abuse types were physical and emotional abuse, as detailed below:

- Twenty one (21) witnesses reported physical abuse.
- Twenty (20) witnesses reported emotional abuse.
- Seventeen (17) witnesses reported neglect.
- Fifteen (15) witnesses reported sexual abuse.

15.24 Twenty three (23) witnesses made reports of more than one abuse type and nine witnesses reported all four types of abuse, as shown in the following table:

Table 85: Abuse Types and Combinations – Male and Female Foster Care

Abuse types and combinations	Number of reports
Physical, sexual, neglect and emotional	9
Physical, neglect and emotional	4
Physical and emotional	4
Sexual, neglect and emotional	2
Physical, sexual and neglect	1
Physical, sexual and emotional	1
Physical and sexual	1
Physical and neglect	1
Sexual	1
Total	24

Source: Confidential Committee of CICA, 2009

- 15.25 Combinations of physical and sexual abuse were reported by half of the witnesses, in addition to further reports of emotional abuse and neglect.

Physical abuse

The wilful, reckless or negligent infliction of physical injury on, or failure to prevent such injury to, the child¹.

- 15.26 This section of the Report presents the evidence given to the Committee by witnesses regarding their experiences of being physically abused and injured by non-accidental means, and their lack of protection from such abuse while in foster care. The forms of abuse reported included hitting, punching, kicking and bodily assault with implements. Witnesses also reported being physically abused by being burned, spat upon and immersed in water.

- 15.27 There were 21 reports of physical abuse from eight male and 13 female witnesses in 19 foster care placements. Four (4) witnesses reported being physically abused in two particular foster placements.

Description of physical abuse

- 15.28 Fifteen (15) of the 21 witnesses who reported being physically abused described being beaten regularly with sticks or household implements, including wooden spoons, rolling pins, broom handles, dishes, and coat hangers. One witness reported being beaten with a leather harness and a stick. Others described being ‘*thrashed with a chain*’ and beaten with a horsewhip. Five (5) of the witnesses reported being beaten on a daily basis. One witness recounted how her foster parents took turns to hold her down and beat her. Witnesses also described being slapped, punched and kicked by their foster parents and other family members. The locations of physical abuse described by witnesses included the foster homes, farm sheds and fields.

It's the physical beatings and kickings. He ... (foster father)... would, for no apparent reason ... deal out.... It was like a daily ritual, any whimsical time that suited him ... he beat us.... I have this vision in my mind of cowering in a corner and being beaten with a stick, and kicked.

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She ... (foster mother)... always slapped in the head or in the face and you would always be in a corner, just getting one slap after another into the face. ... You couldn't even think past putting your hands up to stop the slaps hitting you. ... You would be trying to protect yourself and she would be screaming “don't you dare protect yourself” and you would try and put your hands down but it just couldn't be done. That happened a good few times, that's what happened when you did things wrong.

- 15.29 Four (4) witnesses described being burned by various means including being struck with hot pokers, pushed into fires, and having hot liquid thrown over them. Two (2) witnesses described having their heads held under water until they thought they might drown, as punishment for bed-wetting. Two (2) foster mothers were reported to regularly wash out the witnesses' mouths with soap for allegedly telling lies or as a general punishment.

Mother ...(foster mother)... got the poker, she stuck it in the fire and took it out, it was so hot, you could see through it and said to my ...foster father... “hold her”, my...(foster)... father said “this is going too far, no way”.... She said “hold her” and he held me back in the chair, she said to put my hand out, and she placed the poker in it ...distressed... and all I remember is passing out.... The pain, I'll never forget it....

¹ Section 1(1)(a).

15.30 Witnesses reported being physically abused in response to various perceived misdemeanours and other behaviour, including bed-wetting, telling lies, speaking to and being friendly with local children, and not keeping up with chores, particularly farm work. Four (4) female witnesses believed that they were physically abused both as a means of coercion and ensuring silence about sexual abuse.

15.31 Fifteen (15) witnesses, both male and female, who reported abuse in foster care prior to the 1980s reported being required to undertake hard physical labour, particularly farm work. One witness reported being required to 'work like a man' from the age of eight years. He described having to milk cows, save turf and hay, clean out sheds, take fodder to animals and tend sick animals. He and other witnesses reported being withdrawn from school to work. Several witnesses also reported heavy workloads both in the foster homes and outside on farms. 'I was there to be their slave'. A female witness reported that she was expected to do all the housework in a home that kept paying guests. Another witness described life in a 'chaotic' foster home where the family moved frequently and her work included getting each new home ready in advance for the other family members.

Injuries

15.32 Eight (8) witnesses gave disturbing accounts of severe physical abuse that resulted in them being physically injured or harmed in some way. The isolation of many foster homes, as described by witnesses, increased their sense of helplessness regarding physical abuse. One witness stated that he was regularly beaten until he was so badly injured on one occasion that an ambulance was called and he was removed from the foster placement permanently:

I was beaten to the point of a child's submission to death, I gave up and I hoped I would die.... Obviously someone had been watching, because that particular evening when I was so weak from the beating, I think I may have passed out. ... Blood...(was)... pouring out of me. ... I was taken away by ambulance.... A nurse assisted me, she was very kind.

15.33 Another witness stated that he was taken to hospital on two separate occasions following incidents of abuse. On one occasion he reported that he had been burned on the legs and forehead by a hot iron and on the second occasion he was treated for a head injury after the foster mother struck him with a kitchen implement.

15.34 A female witness who reported being regularly 'thrashed' to the ground by both foster parents described being sent to school wearing long stockings to cover bruises and injuries on her legs and on one occasion wore a cap to cover lacerations to her head. The witness reported that no enquires were made about her injuries.

15.35 A witness reported severe physical and sexual abuse throughout her time in a foster home where she was placed as an infant and where she also witnessed other foster children, including babies, being abused. Another witness who had been in foster care since infancy and gave evidence of repeated abuse had a deformed arm and a scar that she believes were the result of early injuries of which she had no memory. The injuries described in the following quotes occurred in the same foster home as mentioned above.

This little girl ...(another foster child)... that came ... we seemed to spend our time sitting around the fire, she was there, I remember she seemed quite small, and they ...(foster parents)... were saying "let's see how much pain she can stand" and they got the hot poker and burned her wrist ...distressed.... I don't know how they could be so cruel ... or why ...distressed.... I have a burn on my wrist and I can only suspect that the same happened to me.

She ... (another foster child)... I don't know if she supposedly told a lie, was standing there ... and they were literally trying to pull her tongue out with a gadget ... a pincers or something.... I remember feeling so terrible, helpless for her, 'cos I'd probably be lined up next if I expressed what I felt for her.

15.36 A male witness reported that his nose was broken following a blow to the face by a member of the foster family. No medical attention was sought and the witness reported having respiratory difficulties since that time. This witness also reported that bruises from beatings were camouflaged by his foster mother.

15.37 There were five witness accounts of physical assaults causing bleeding, including one instance when a witness reported that her foster mother deliberately caught her hand in a door during an argument; she subsequently lost a fingernail.

She gave me my last hiding when I was 17 or 18, with the broom handle, I was cowed...she got me in the face. Of course you were always locked up in the dark room, and I bled like a pig, so I rubbed it all over me, so when she came in she nearly had a heart attack.

Reported abusers

15.38 Witnesses reported being physically abused by both foster parents and their biological children. Thirteen (13) foster mothers and four foster fathers were reported as being consistently abusive. Twelve (12) of the 17 foster parents were identified by name and four of them were each named by two witnesses.

15.39 Three (3) witnesses reported that their foster parents' biological children also abused them. In one instance the reported abuse was perpetrated by several of the foster parents' children acting in unison. The witness reported being treated like a punching bag and as the scapegoat for the biological children's own misdemeanours. The witness believed that the foster parents were aware of this ongoing abuse and condoned it by their failure to intervene. The other two witnesses reported being physically abused by foster siblings in the presence of their foster parents with, it was believed, their consent.

Sexual abuse

The use of the child by a person for sexual arousal or sexual gratification of that person or another person².

15.40 This section presents the evidence of both acute and chronic sexual abuse, provided by witnesses to the Committee. The reported abuse ranged from contact sexual abuse, including rape and associated physical violence, to non-contact abuse such as voyeurism and inappropriate sexual talk. Many witnesses found it difficult to report the details of their sexual abuse. They reported as much or as little detail as they wished when describing their experiences, and at times confined their accounts to general statements regarding contact or non-contact abuse.

15.41 The Committee heard 15 reports of sexual abuse from two male and 13 female witnesses in relation to foster care placements. The reports relate to 13 foster homes. Two (2) foster homes were each the subject of separate reports of sexual abuse by two witnesses.

² Section 1(1)(b).

Description of sexual abuse

15.42 The forms of sexual abuse reported included exhibitionism, exposure to inappropriate sexual behaviour and talk, oral/genital contact, fondling, masturbation, digital penetration, and anal and vaginal rape. Seven (7) witnesses reported being raped, including one witness who reported that she became pregnant as a result of rape by her foster father.

15.43 Witnesses described being sexually abused within the foster homes, in fields, farm buildings and in local business premises. Sexual abuse was frequently reported in combination with physical abuse that was believed to have been used as a threat against the disclosure of sexual abuse and as a component of the sexual abuse. A witness reported the following account of sexual abuse when she was approximately 10 years old:

I'm in the kitchen with ...foster father... and he starts fixing the curtains and makes sure no one can see in and I'm thinking "what's he doing that for?" ... Next thing he picks me up and puts me on the table and takes me knickers off. ... I'll never forget his eyes, they were all glassy ... (witness described penetrative assault) ... and I say "you're hurting me". ... And he stops and he puts me knickers back on and he takes me off the table and he says "don't tell your mother, you know what she's like" and I says to myself "what was all that about?"

15.44 Twelve (12) witnesses reported being sexually abused as young children by male foster family members. Each of these witnesses reported being abused on a regular basis in their own beds, elsewhere within the foster home, when taken for walks or while engaged in farm work. They described being raped, violently assaulted, and exposed to pornography and images of bestiality.

If he ...(foster parents' biological son)... was in bed of a Sunday, she'd ...(foster mother)... send me down to call him. He'd... (digital penetration described)... and I remember I was bleeding, and I was afraid and I didn't know what to do. ... He used to say to me "if you say anything you will be taken back to a Home" ...distressed....

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I woke up with him... (foster father)... in the bed with me and he had penetrated me with his fingers and I was very sore, I tried to scream but nothing would come out... He warned me not to say anything, that he'd kill me if I did.

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Her son...(foster mother's biological son)...he did pornography, I now know what it is, I didn't then... and all the locals used to come for the stuff...it was animals and humans he did....

15.45 One witness reported she was sexually abused by a workman on the farm where she was also abused by the foster parents' son. Another witness reported being sexually abused from the age of approximately five years, and described abuse that progressed from fondling to digital penetration and progressed to full intercourse when she was seven years old. This witness reported being sexually abused by both her foster father and foster brother, and believed that her foster father encouraged his adolescent son to abuse her to deflect attention from his own abuse of her at the same time.

15.46 Six (6) witnesses reported their belief that their sexual abuse by male family members was tolerated, if not encouraged, by the foster mother. Three (3) witnesses believed that their foster parents condoned and facilitated sexual abuse by their sons, one of whom was an adult. Four (4) of the witnesses reported being sexually abused when their foster mothers were absent from the home either working or visiting relatives.

Everything was for ...named foster brother.... There was luxuries bought for ...X... because he was out working and I wasn't. ...Foster mother... would go out and leave me there on me own with him. ... He'd start doing things like tucking me dress into me knickers, he was 16 then. ... His face was so red. ... He'd have biscuits hidden in the room and he'd give me the biscuits and I'd just stand there and I'd be eating the biscuits and he'd be doing all this to me. Although he was doing this ... a strange feeling comes over you because you know it's wrong, you know what he's doing is wrong but you can do nothing about it because you're not in control, he's in control. Your mind just moves away from it, you're kind of a zombie in other words. Then when we're in the house on our own he starts making me undress ... and he's there all the time and I wake-up in the morning he's on top of me. ... He'd have a fist up to my face ... threatening me ...(to stay quiet)....

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The auld fella ...(foster father)... never stopped pulling himself ...(masturbating).... He'd come in drunk and start chasing you around the house wanting to kiss you. ... It was revolting. ... She ...(foster mother)... would think it was just a bit of fun, but it wasn't, it was dirt. ... It suited her ...(that his attention was diverted)....

- 15.47** Three (3) witnesses reported being sexually abused by male adults from the local community who they believed were aware that they were foster children. All three witnesses reported being fearful that disclosure of their abuse would result in them being removed from foster homes where they were otherwise happy. The witnesses commented on their fear of being returned to the institutions where they had previously resided and where they reported being subjected to more pervasive abuse.
- 15.48** Another witness reported being moved from a Children's Home where she had been sexually abused by a visiting priest. The same priest subsequently visited the foster home where she had been transferred and he continued to abuse her there.
- 15.49** Three (3) witnesses, two of whom were male and one was female, described inappropriate sleeping arrangements in the foster placements where they shared beds with male adults who sexually abused them.
- 15.50** There were consistent accounts from four female witnesses of being sexually abused on a regular basis by the foster fathers in two foster homes over many years. The witnesses were placed in the foster homes as toddlers. All four witnesses reported being forced to spend lengthy periods of time working in the fields and farmyards with their foster fathers who routinely sexually abused them by fondling and masturbation and in two instances by digital penetration and rape. The witnesses also reported being subjected to severe physical abuse by both their foster parents.

Reported abusers

- 15.51** The 15 witnesses reported being sexually abused while in foster care by 18 individuals, 17 male and one female. Thirteen (13) of the reported abusers were identified by name and the other five were referred to by their status as foster parent, workman or other.
- 15.52** Five (5) witnesses reported being sexually abused by more than one individual in their foster care placements. One witness reported being sexually abused by both a foster mother and her son. Eight (8) witnesses reported sexual abuse perpetrated by six foster fathers and by four biological sons of foster care providers.

I used to think that sexual abuse meant rape. I didn't understand, I thought I was bad and that it only happened to me. He ... (foster parents' son)... used to maul...(my)...

private parts. ... If she ... (foster mother)... was going off he'd say to leave me...(at home)... he wanted me to do things, she'd say to stay at home, there was work to be done. He'd abuse me every opportunity he got.

- 15.53** Six (6) of the 15 witnesses reported being sexually abused by eight male adults who were members of the local community or others who were not members of the foster family household. They included a local youth, workman, neighbour, shop-keeper, priest, and relatives of the foster parents. The witnesses encountered these men when they were sent for messages to local shops or were unsupervised, either in the foster homes or in other locations in the community.

Neglect

Failure to care for the child which results, or could reasonably be expected to result, in serious impairment of the physical or mental health or development of the child or serious adverse effects on his or her behaviour or welfare.³

- 15.54** Witnesses reported that their care was neglected at many levels both by the actions and inactions of those who had a duty of care for their welfare. They reported neglect both while in foster care and in the process by which foster families were selected and supervised.

Description of neglect

- 15.55** The main areas of neglect reported by 17 witnesses were; the inappropriate placement of children with foster parents who were unable to meet their developmental and social needs, the subsequent absence of supervision of the foster care placements, neglect of bodily integrity, lack of adequate food and clothing, neglect of education and inappropriate work. A further area of neglect reported by witnesses in this group was the lack of provision made for their future and the failure to provide aftercare or transitional support from the age of 16 years.

Work

- 15.56** Fifteen (15) witnesses reported having to work for their foster parents, in 10 instances on the family farm caring for animals, cleaning farm buildings, working in the fields, cutting and drawing timber, turf and hay, and carrying water. This work was reported to have taken precedence over other activities, particularly school attendance. Ten (10) witnesses reported being responsible for a large share of the housework in the foster homes including cooking, sewing, cleaning and carrying water. Five (5) witnesses reported being sent to work for neighbouring farmers and the relatives of their foster parents as 'hired help', but received no payment.

Physically having to work so hard, we weren't big.... It seemed like it was always freezing cold, snow and frost.... In winter ... sawing down trees, in the midst of him ... (foster father)... hurling abuse.... The memory of dragging what seemed like trees across fields to the back garden and then sawing them down to logs....

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We cut wood everyday when we came home from school and in the summer holidays we went felling.... They felled the trees and I was always considered a man in relation to the cross cut... (saw)... You would always be up to your knees in water and you had to saw... and trim the tree and it had to be cut up and brought back... and got ready... for the people who wanted it.... Every Saturday you took the wood to town... the school holidays were taken up with this...

³ Section 1(1)(c) as amended by section 3 of the 2005 Act.

Education

- 15.57** Eleven (11) witnesses reported on the lack of education they were afforded through being kept out of school to work at household or farm chores. A number of the witnesses commented on the fact that education was generally regarded as a low priority by their foster parents.

School ... was a very difficult time ... the worst thing was not being allowed to do homework.... I would be trying to do it on the side of the road.... I wanted to be educated.... I managed to scrape through the Primary Cert and I took home this certificate, and was so proud of it. I remember her ...(foster mother)... holding it up and ceremoniously tearing it, ripping it up ... and threw it straight in the fire.

- 15.58** Five (5) witnesses reported that they received little formal education as a result of the demands placed on them to do household and farm work for their foster parents. One witness who had been sexually abused reported that when she became disruptive at school she was excluded and kept at home full-time to help her foster mother with a home-based commercial enterprise.

General welfare and personal care

- 15.59** Eight (8) witnesses reported being sent to school in clothing inferior to that worn by local children. Poor quality and inadequate clothing was reported to have been replaced with good clothes on special occasions, such as official visitors calling and outings.

- 15.60** Eight (8) witnesses described receiving insufficient food and, in particular, being isolated at mealtimes when they were either not permitted to eat with the other family members or were given inferior food. One witness described being made to sit in the corner of the kitchen, where he recalled being thrown food scraps from the table:

On all occasions when dinner was taking place ... I was put into the corner ... of the kitchen.... I had my dinner fed to me by ... one of the men ... in the house ... (who) would throw it ...(a piece of meat)... into me in the corner and I would eat that.

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I remember coming in from school and the skillet was on the floor on the piece of sacking...cows udders, pigs tails, cabbage...you weren't allowed to the table...everything was Middle Ages, I don't know why we deserved that.

- 15.61** This witness also reported being told that when he was moved to another placement his new foster mother had to prevent him from eating the hen's food in the farmyard. He believed he had been so hungry in the previous placement that he had developed a habit of eating the animal feed.

- 15.62** In seven foster homes all aspects of care were reported as neglectful, including both insufficient bedding being available and inadequate hygiene facilities. One witness reported on the lack of privacy available in the foster home where she was regularly stripped to be washed in the kitchen in front of male adults. Five (5) witnesses, three male and two female, reported being made to share beds with adults, despite there being alternative sleeping arrangements available. As previously mentioned, three of these witnesses reported being sexually abused.

- 15.63** Eight (8) witnesses reported that their foster parents always had at least one other and often several foster children at the same time. The belief that they were regarded as a source of income rather than children in need of care was expressed by many of the witnesses.

Supervision and inspections

- 15.64** Fifteen (15) witnesses recalled officials visiting their foster homes. These visitors were described as social workers, public health nurses, and others, some of whom were known by name but not

by their professional role. The Committee heard from witnesses that after the mid-1980s official visits were more regular. Seven (7) witnesses reported that social workers called to the foster homes on a regular basis. Several of the visiting social workers, public health nurses, and other officials were described as not speaking directly to the witnesses or other foster children but instead spent their time talking with the foster mothers. There were three reports of visiting inspectors being shown bedrooms used by family members where they were incorrectly told the witness and other foster children slept. One witness who reported being sexually abused on a regular basis within her foster home recalled the inspector's visits, and another commented on the preparation made for planned visits:

Miss ...X..., a nice young lady, she used to come to the house, used to drop in and just look at me, and on the face of it I would be seen to be well fed and kept very clean and well dressed. So, on the face of it, I would be seen to be well looked after but ... in hindsight ... I should have been taken away and spoken to on my own.

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Visitors...do-gooders would come, the ladies with the cars and the furs would come. She...foster mother ...got all the clothes from the pawn...(shop)... and all the stuff would be home out of the pawn and would be laid out and then they went back again when they left...In those days of course you didn't have a voice, nobody thought you had a brain even.

15.65 In one instance a witness reported that she believed the social worker was a social acquaintance of the foster parents, which made it difficult for the witness to disclose sexual abuse. Another witness recalled that official visitors came to see two other foster children in the home but nobody ever came to see her: '*Someone ...(inspector)... called to see them 2 girls ...(foster siblings)... Nobody ever called to see me. ... The other 2 girls were paid for, they had to go to school, but I wasn't.*' Witnesses were of the view that official visits were prearranged, they recalled being dressed in their 'Sunday clothes' and that the house was tidied by way of preparation for the inspectors.

15.66 Three (3) witnesses reported that their foster parents applied to adopt them; all reported being abused in their foster homes. One of these witnesses reported that the only visit she could recall during her lengthy foster care placement was when a woman came to assess her foster parents' suitability as adoptive parents. The adoption was not approved but she remained in the foster home, where she reported that she continued to be abused. The other two witnesses reported that each of their foster homes had been visited on a regular basis by women whom they identified as nurses. The witnesses reported being officially adopted by their foster parents when they were approximately 10 years old and recalled no further visits from the nurses. Both witnesses reported that they continued to be abused following their adoption. Their evidence relating to abuse during the post-adoption period is not included in this report, being outside the remit of the Commission.

Socialisation and follow-up care

15.67 Eleven (11) witnesses reported being deprived of the opportunity to socialise and play. Five (5) witnesses reported that they were not allowed to play with local children and seven witnesses reported having no toys or playthings. The dominant memory for these 11 witnesses is of working, either on the farms, in the houses, or for relatives and neighbours of the foster parents.

15.68 Failure on behalf of the supervising authorities to provide for the practical and psychological needs of young people in foster care was highlighted as an area of neglect by many witnesses. This concern was specifically raised in relation to the absence of any preparation for discharge from foster care or preparation for a more independent adult life. Witnesses reported having to resort to their own courage and ingenuity when they reached the age of 16 years. They then

became aware that they could or would have to leave the foster home as the authorities no longer had responsibility for their placement and foster payments had ceased.

She took everything I had, clothes, photographs, everything, so I went and got a job and told nobody, I got the job with an agency and I went and I never came back to Ireland until I knew she was dead. I used to ring...local person...and ask if she was still alive. I know it was very callous of me but the hold and damage she did to my life...

15.69 In addition to the lack of preparation provided for witnesses' discharge from foster care, the lack of support of post-discharge follow-up was reported as a further area of neglect.

15.70 Seven (7) female witnesses reported that they became pregnant and/or married before they were 20 years old to 'escape' foster homes from which there appeared to be no other route to independence.

In my opinion I was thrown to the wolves ... the injustice ... because I feel nobody cared. I got married at 17 for security, he was ...several years... older than me. I tried to get out of a bad situation but I got into a worse one.

15.71 Five (5) other witnesses reported that they never left their foster homes as they had 'nowhere else to go' or felt duty-bound to remain and care for elderly foster parents in what one witness referred to as a 'prison'. The witnesses reported that they remained in their foster homes until they married or until their foster parents died.

15.72 Six (6) witnesses left their foster care placements in varying circumstances. Four (4) witnesses reported that they drew attention to their unhappiness by running away, disclosing abuse or asking to be moved. Two (2) witnesses were then placed in hostels where they reported receiving more support and professional assistance for their particular difficulties. Another witness described being given a home by a kind elderly neighbour who acted as a guardian until his death when the witness was a young adult.

15.73 Two (2) witnesses reported being sent to work as live-in domestics in institutional settings where they remained until they were sufficiently confident to move to positions where they had more freedom. Three (3) other witnesses found jobs when they were 16 years old and gradually became more independent and/or got married.

15.74 Four (4) witnesses who had minor disabilities gave accounts of being 'dumped' one way or another when they became ill, their principal foster carer died or the witness reached the age when foster care payments ceased. In these circumstances witnesses reported that different people, including relatives of the foster parents and welfare professionals, arranged assistance for them, including placement on a training program, transfer to a rehabilitation hospital and support with independent living.

15.75 Two (2) witnesses reported that they returned to live with their biological families when the difficulties that led to their out-of-home placement had been resolved.

Emotional abuse

Any other act or omission towards the child which results, or could reasonably be expected to result, in serious impairment of the physical or mental health or development of the child or serious adverse effects on his or her behaviour or welfare.⁴

⁴ Section 1(1)(d) as amended by section 3 of the 2005 Act.

15.76 The emotional abuse reported to the Committee included verbal abuse, social isolation and lack of affection, denial of contact with other children, denial of identity, personal ridicule, humiliation, and family denigration. Witnesses also reported being subjected to constant threats of abandonment, including being told that they would be '*sent back*' or '*sent away*' to an Industrial School if they misbehaved or displeased their foster parents.

Description of emotional abuse

15.77 The experience of being placed with foster families was marked by loneliness and isolation for many of the 24 witnesses who gave evidence to the Committee, 18 of whom reported being emotionally abused while in foster care. They reported feeling '*abandoned*' to their fate, ignored by State authorities, and forgotten about by parents and relatives, including biological parents, some of whom subsequently married and reared families.

15.78 Four (4) witnesses reported being placed with foster families where they were exposed to trauma and emotional instability in the context of domestic violence, marital conflict or mental illness.

There were rows all the time, when something would go wrong we ... (foster children)... were called names. If something was lost ... (foster mother would say)... "that bastard's lost it". ... (foster carers were)... always throwing things around.

15.79 Four (4) other witnesses reported being removed from placements where they had been settled, and relocated with different foster carers. They reported that the transfers occurred without discussion. The witnesses believed that their placement transfers were facilitated for the specific purpose of providing company and assistance to elderly, childless individuals and couples.

15.80 One witness described spending the first nine years of his life in a foster home where he was very happy and where he suffered no abuse. He recounted being sent with 24 hours' notice and no explanation to another foster home where he was physically and sexually abused. Another witness reported being removed from a settled placement to be sent as a foster child to an elderly woman, commenting that the papers facilitating this placement were signed by a priest who was a close relative of the woman. A male witness reported being sent from a residential institution where he had been placed with his siblings. He reported that he was placed with a farming couple who had no children, where he worked hard until he was discharged to his own family when he was 16 years old.

Lack of affection

15.81 Eleven (11) witnesses reported being shown no affection by their foster parents. The experience of being deprived of affection was particularly remarked upon by witnesses who were placed with families where there were biological children. Witnesses reported being treated differently and less favourably than the biological children; for example three witnesses reported being sexually abused by the sons of their foster parents from whom they were afforded no protection.

15.82 Eight (8) witnesses reported that their foster parents were consistently harsh and unkind to them. They reported being treated as unpaid labourers rather than as children and frequently reminded that they were '*orphans*'.

She ... (foster mother)... was always telling me "I'm not your mother, I got you from the Home and I can give you back just as quick". ... This woman didn't want me and she couldn't get rid of me.

•

We had to put up with her ... (foster mother)... and her uncontrollable temper. She will probably never know the hurt she has caused or the influence she has had. I don't think she ever saw me as a child, just an annoyance and every little thing I did just annoyed her. She hated me, she told me often enough.

Social isolation

15.83 A number of witnesses described being isolated from support both within the foster home and in the wider community. They reported being forbidden to speak or interact with the biological children in the family and were discouraged from sharing confidences with other foster children. Witnesses described witnessing other foster children in the family being abused but feeling unable to defend them or offer them any support for fear of attracting similar abuse themselves. *'We...foster children... didn't talk to each other, we all lived in a sort of personal isolation because we couldn't trust each other...*

15.84 Witnesses also described being prevented or discouraged from interacting with neighbours. Three (3) witnesses regarded this as a protective measure due to the derogatory manner in which they were treated by the neighbouring children. Witnesses also reported being ostracised in the local school, subjected to offensive remarks from other children and, in four instances, from teachers. *'Some of the local school children knew we were bastards, told us so and threw stones as we passed'*. Other witnesses believed that being forbidden to speak to local children was a means of reinforcing their isolation and sense of being different from other children.

15.85 It was reported that the neighbours of one foster family were particularly kind and it was believed that they attempted to protect the foster children in various ways. A witness reported that she and other foster children were sent out at night to steal from these neighbours' fields, causing much fear and anguish:

We'd be sent to steal firewood from the neighbours...you'd be frightened and they'd ... (foster parents)... kind of absolve themselves of all responsibility because they'd say ... "you're orphans, we won't have any responsibility, that ... (stealing)... is expected of you kind of people"... You knew you were doing something wrong, at school we knew the 7th commandment, "thou shalt not steal"... I was totally confused by all this and the fact that they'd ... (foster parents)... report it was us who stole.... It wasn't a nice feeling.

Personal denigration

15.86 Denigration and humiliation was described by witnesses as taking several forms. Fourteen (14) witnesses reported being called names, with particular reference to the circumstances of their birth: *'nothing but a bastard', 'you are whore's milk', 'a black man's bastard', 'Local people referred to us as... 'X's... (foster mother's)... bastards'*. Witnesses also reported being called derogatory nicknames with reference to personal features or characteristics. Three (3) witnesses had physical disabilities that they reported were the subject of constant ridicule and humiliation.

15.87 Other experiences reported by witnesses were being denied privacy for bathing, being subjected to derogatory remarks about bed-wetting and other personal matters in front of members of the household, and being made to eat apart from the family or outside the house with farm animals. One witness described being made to walk several miles to Mass each Sunday, while there were bicycles in the house that he was never allowed to use.

Denial of identity

15.88 Five (5) witnesses reported that they did not know their own birth names or were not called by their birth names and three witnesses reported being misled about their biological family.

The problem is I wasn't registered when I was born, I have no birth cert. I was baptised twice, but I have no birth cert. When I was going to buy a house one time, they said I

had to get a ... birth cert. I went in to Lombard House looking for a birth cert ... never heard of me. You can't go away or anything, or you can't get a passport.

•

I wasn't ever called by my name.... It is hard ... (to talk about)... some of this thing, because it is so personal ...distressed... because it's like remaining that person ...(with the derogatory name)... and I think they did a good job. I was called ...X (reference to physical attribute)... I'd only ever hear my... (real)... name when the authorities came. ... I can see this man, this tall stately person, coming down on a bicycle. I think he used to pay them their dues for foster care ... then I'd know my name.

•

She'd ... (foster mother)... say I was nobody anyway.... I felt this psychological abuse was very hard to take.... She succeeded in making me feel I was nobody.

•

I find my childhood haunts me. I've been searching for who I was...I sat for a week when I got the letter to say that I actually came from somewhere...when I go to Ireland I actually feel the pain of not belonging.

•

When I was 15 I thought that maybe someone would come and say "well here's your letters and your papers and things about your mother" and all that but the people that knew my mother would never tell me anything. Up to less than 10 years ago there were people who knew her but they wouldn't tell me anything.

- 15.89** One witness became aware that the foster mother knew the whereabouts of the witness's siblings but refused to disclose this information. Another witness reported being told as a child that his biological parents were dead and subsequently learned that his foster carers had always known that this was not true. Another witness reported becoming aware in more recent years that a child who was in the same foster home throughout childhood was, in fact, a sibling.

Knowledge of abuse

- 15.90** Witnesses commented that the public nature of certain aspects of the abuse they were subjected to made awareness by others unavoidable. They reported being abused in front of others, being visibly neglected and unhappy and presenting to doctors and hospitals for the treatment of injuries inflicted through abuse and violence. They reported being aware that neighbours, teachers, visiting professionals and members of the local community knew they were being abused in their foster homes. Witnesses reported that disclosures of abuse were at times investigated with positive outcome. Other witnesses stated they were either ignored or punished when they disclosed their abuse.

- 15.91** Eleven (11) of the 24 witnesses reported that they disclosed their abuse to someone or confronted their abuser and successfully resisted any further abuse.

When I was 17 I went to...professional...one day, I didn't know where to go... I spent about 2 hours, I brought everything...(sexual abuse)... out to her, crying to her, non-stop... and although I didn't know it at the time she obviously reported it to the Health Board and it was to get priority... I read that on the files... (afterwards)... but it never got priority, nobody ever came back to me.

- 15.92** Eight (8) of the 11 witnesses reported their abuse to professionals, including visiting nurses, social workers and the local family doctor. In each instance, with one exception, the disclosure was responded to in a positive manner in that the witness was believed and either moved from

the foster home or the abuse ceased. In some instances the response was not immediate but did occur eventually. Four (4) of the witnesses were removed from their foster homes, two of whom were placed in residential institutions and continued to spend holidays with the foster parents. Another witness was removed from an abusive foster home and placed with a kind but elderly foster carer who died when the witness was 14 years old. As previously stated one witness reported that she ran away from her foster home where she was abused and was taken in by a neighbouring family where she continued to live, with the knowledge of the visiting inspector. Despite informing this person about the severe daily abuse she had experienced, the witness reported that other foster children remained in that foster placement. Another female witness reported that following a 'savage rape' she haemorrhaged and fainted in a public place, following which her foster mother became aware of her sexual abuse and although she remained with that foster family the foster father ceased abusing her.

15.93 One witness reported that her disclosure of physical abuse to the visiting social worker resulted in further abuse and a deterioration in the already conflicted relationship with her foster mother.

15.94 Six (6) witnesses reported that they either told their foster mothers that they were being sexually abused by their foster fathers or the foster mothers became aware of the sexual abuse as a result of subsequent events. In four instances the foster mothers were reported to either disbelieve the witness or blame them for the resultant problems in the family. One witness reported that her foster mother said '*there are no bad men, only bad women*', when she learned that the witness had been sexually abused by the foster father over a number of years. Another foster mother was reported to blame the witness for trying to '*come between*' herself and her husband. The witness reported that the foster mother was physically abusing both the witness and another foster child in the foster father's absence.

We said to ...foster mother... that he was always pulling on himself ... (masturbating)...., but she didn't believe us. She said we were just jealous, that we didn't want her to be going out at night time,... (leaving witness with foster father)... and she ignored it.

15.95 Two (2) witnesses reported that while their foster mothers were distressed by the disclosures of sexual abuse against their husbands, they accepted what they were told and assisted the witness to be protected. The witnesses acknowledged positive aspects of the general care they received in the foster homes and were afraid that the security of their placement would be compromised by disclosing the fact of their sexual abuse.

15.96 Three (3) witnesses believed that other adults were aware of the abuse they were subjected to by observing what happened. They reported that no action was taken to address the abusive situations. For example, one witness described being constantly assaulted by a member of the foster family. This behaviour occurred in view of the foster parents whom the witness believed exploited her presence in the family as a means of coping with their other difficulties. In a separate foster home another female witness stated that she was treated by the family doctor for burns to her arm having been hit with a hot poker by her foster mother.

Eventually they called the doctor, she warned me when he came I was to keep my mouth shut, she would tell him what happened.... I thought, "at least, thank God, it will come out now" ...distressed... because I didn't think she would tell a lie.... But she told the doctor that she couldn't keep me away from the fire and that I had come down and put my hand straight on the bars...(of the fire grate).... The doctor told me off.

15.97 A witness who reported being taken to hospital for treatment of burns and a head injury following different assault incidents reported being asked no questions by the hospital staff regarding how his injuries were sustained. This witness also reported being sent to school with

his arm in a sling following a beating without any questions being asked by the teachers regarding his injury.

- 15.98** One witness's disclosure of sexual abuse precipitated an investigation by the supervising authorities. The witness reported that she believed the outcome of the investigation was compromised by the fact that the professionals and foster parents were socially acquainted. The witness reported being eventually successful in having her abuse acknowledged and being protected from further abuse.

Positive experiences

- 15.99** Thirteen (13) witnesses reported a range of positive experiences in relation to their time both in foster care and in employment placements after they were discharged. Despite making reports of physical and sexual abuse six witnesses also reported that their foster parents were kind and provided them with good homes where they felt accepted. These reports related to both non-abusing foster parents and, in three instances, to the foster parent who also abused them.

I don't want to take it...(childhood abuse)... any further.... They...(foster parents)... are part of my family now, always will be...I think no matter who you are or where you are in life you all need somewhere to go back to, we all need a base...just to say to anybody that you have a family somewhere, that you're not a total orphan. I do need a family, of course I do, I'm a human being.

•

I never knew I could do things ...everyone worked very hard to help me... (at work)...the people I worked with were really kind, the tutors used to carry on at me saying "come on"...(by way of encouragement)

•

My boss used to say "you have your black dog"...(depression)... and I'd say "yes", she'd say "go work out the back where no-one will disturb you".

- 15.100** Three (3) witnesses stated that they enjoyed going to school where they were well treated by kind teachers whom they believed were sympathetic regarding their home circumstances. Four (4) other witnesses commented on the particular kindness of neighbours whom they believed knew they were not well treated in their foster placements and found opportunities to extend small treats. One witness described being given sweets by the shopkeeper when sent to get alcohol for a foster parent. Other witnesses commented:

I would go to a neighbour who I knew would welcome me...they have been very important people in my life, very influential because of their kindness.

•

I could smell trouble and get out the window like greased lightning and go to the neighbours at the back, they understood.

- 15.101** Four (4) witnesses reported that they were well provided for in their foster homes in terms of being well fed and clothed but that they were expected to work hard in exchange for the care they received, as one witness remarked 'it was ok until the work started'.

Current circumstances

- 15.102** The witnesses who reported abuse in foster care described widely divergent adult life circumstances, the main themes of which are reported below. On the basis of information

provided, it is believed that these differences reflect the length of time witnesses spent in out-of-home care, the extent of abuse they were exposed to while in foster care, the circumstances in which the abuse occurred, and the outcome of their disclosures at the time.⁵

Relationships

- 15.103** Eleven (11) witnesses were married at the time of their hearings and another three were widowed after marriages of over 20 years' duration. While acknowledging difficulties, seven of the witnesses reported that their marriages were stable, happy and supportive as did two of those witnesses now widowed:

I am so, so lucky I met...wife..., such a lovely woman, I am sure I must have been a terrible torment to her at times.

•

I was terrified of getting married, I didn't know if I could love someone...my husband, he put up with me. I wasn't interested in sex, to me it was dirty, it had no nice romantic feel about it. I feel I was a failure as a wife to him...sex was always a chore and that was wrong, but I could do nothing about it. I tried to compensate... I kept a good home....

- 15.104** Six (6) witnesses reported that their marriages had been or were currently unhappy and unstable, four of them reported living with violent and abusive partners and two were separated from previous partners with whom they had children.
- 15.105** Three (3) witnesses had either married or become involved in a relationship and become pregnant before they were 20 years old. They each described their early relationships as unsuccessful attempts to have a life of their own away from their foster family.
- 15.106** Five (5) witnesses who were single stated that they had either not been able to sustain an intimate relationship because they felt too ashamed of their personal circumstances or were deterred from engaging in a close relationship by their experience of being sexually abused. Three (3) other witnesses were separated.
- 15.107** Two (2) witnesses reported that they were co-habiting, one of whom had experienced long periods of homelessness and emotional turmoil, while the other, younger witness reported a briefer and more settled relationship history.
- 15.108** Several witnesses also commented on the general difficulty they experienced relating to people they met socially, after they left foster care. They described social relationships as complicated by their inexperience of normal social interactions and family relationships. Witnesses reported learning how to cope by observing others and by being fortunate enough to have kind employers who understood their difficulties. Some witnesses commented that they have continued to struggle with this aspect of their lives.

I didn't know how to function and I'd have to go around and ask people "how do I deal with this?" I pick people and I latch on to them and I learn from them because I suppose they have certain values I look for...I mean you can't love unless you are shown love...

•

That...(working as live-in housekeeper)... was the first time that I saw what a family life was... to see how a family lived together, see how it could be.

⁵ This section contains some unavoidable overlap with the details provided by seven witnesses who also reported abuse in other out-of-home settings.

Parenting

- 15.109** Twenty (20) witnesses, six male and 14 female, reported having a total of 76 children, not all of whom they subsequently reared. One witness reported that she placed a child for adoption and two others reported that their children were either placed in foster care or reared by their biological fathers. Three (3) witnesses reported that they either adopted children or reared step-children in addition to their own biological children.
- 15.110** One witness reported that one of her children was sexually abused by a violent partner, four other witnesses commented that their parenting experience was negatively influenced by the presence of violent and abusive partners, or by their own harsh and critical behaviour.
- 15.111** Two (2) witnesses reported that they had no children and there was no information available regarding two other witnesses' parenting experience.
- 15.112** Ten (10) witnesses reported that they enjoyed being a parent and had good relationships with their children, most of whom were independent adults at the time of the hearings. Education and family stability were important aspects of the parenting experience for these witnesses.

We reared the... children we had... it was a terrible struggle...financially...it wasn't easy, but it was joyful at the same time. We have a wonderful family of children and grandkids now and I am so happy that I got to this stage because there were periods in my life when I thought I was going to be killed or die and that is a fact.

- 15.113** Eight (8) witnesses reported that relationships with their children varied over the duration of their parenting. Five (5) witnesses commented on the difficulties they experienced with their first child compared with later children. The different experiences were attributed in some instances to post-natal depression, immaturity, and the early death of a child.
- 15.114** Four (4) witnesses commented on their difficulty establishing emotional bonds with their own children. One witness described herself as being a '*terrified mother*', who, as a result of her childhood experiences, lacked confidence in her ability to relate to her children. Another witness described a close relationship with her family who learned to live with her difficulty expressing emotion:

I've gone numb inside...it's what it does to your feeling...I couldn't say "I love you", she ... (granddaughter) ...tells me she loves me and I can't tell her... my son teases me because he knows I can't cope with emotions... they're used to it.

Occupational and employment status

- 15.115** Eleven (11) witnesses reported attending second or third-level education, while 12 others did not proceed beyond primary school. As previously reported 11 witnesses reported being kept out of school on a regular basis to work for their foster parents, five of whom reported receiving a negligible education as a result of the expectations placed on them to assist with farm and housework. Witnesses commented that their subsequent working lives were disadvantaged by this early neglect of their education. Witnesses also reported being sent to work when they reached school-leaving age in jobs that provided no prospects for their future employment but that were seen to provide an extra source of income for their foster parents.

She...(foster mother)... never let me out of her clutches until I was 20 and went away...(left Ireland)... When I was 15 she arranged for me to go into the commercial laundry for 2 and a half years. She collected the money for that, I never saw it. There was...X number...of us there and no records. I went to...named hospital...after that and I have no records there either...invisible...I can't get a pension you see because there is no records and no contributions paid, they said that was because it was a training school. I don't know what we were training for...I was on men's shirts, ironing them for 2 years.

15.116 Table 86, which follows, shows the highest level of education attended, but not necessarily completed, by witnesses reporting abuse in foster care placements:

Table 86: Highest Level of Education Attended – Male and Female Foster Care

Highest level of education	Males	Females	Total witnesses
Primary	4	8	12
Secondary	3	4	7
Third level	1	3	4
Unavailable	0	1	1
Total	8	16	24

Source: Confidential Committee of CICA, 2009

15.117 Seven (7) witnesses reported being employed at the time of their hearings, seven others were retired, and a further three witnesses reported being actively engaged in home duties. Five (5) witnesses reported being unemployed at the time of their hearing, having been previously employed, and two witnesses had been out of work for several years and were in receipt of disability income.

15.118 Thirteen (13) witnesses reported having been in stable employment for between 10 and 50 years. Male witnesses reported being principally employed in skilled trade and labouring positions and female witnesses reported that they worked in a range of domestic and service positions. Two (2) female witnesses trained in professional occupations and two others were promoted to positions of responsibility in administrative occupations.

15.119 Six (6) female witnesses reported that they were occupied in home duties for most of their lives, having worked briefly in unskilled positions before they married. Five (5) witnesses reported that they never worked for any substantial period of time. They described themselves as unable to deal with authority and/or cope with the demands and expectations of the workplace: *'The only thing I know is how to survive, I don't know how to progress.'*

Accommodation

15.120 Most witnesses reported having stable and secure living arrangements at the time of their hearings. A small number of witnesses were dependant on the private rental market, community support services, or the support of relatives. Three (3) witnesses reported having experienced long periods of homelessness and instability in the past and four others reported having been dependant on the goodwill of their foster families for shelter in later adolescence and adulthood.

I've never really had my own place, I've been just pushed and pushed around...I always dream that I could have a home where I could put my head down and nobody could come in through that wall...



The thing about orphans is that when we get into trouble the only place they can put us is into prison...because we don't have homes to go to, we don't have people to latch onto...

15.121 At the time of their hearing witnesses described their accommodation as follows:

- Ten (10) witnesses owned their own homes.
- Eight (8) witnesses lived in local authority housing.
- Four (4) witnesses were living in private rented or sheltered accommodation.
- Two (2) witnesses lived with relatives.

Health

- 15.122** During the course of their hearings witnesses provided general information regarding their health and well-being, either directly or while describing other aspects of their lives. For the purpose of writing this Report the Committee categorised the witnesses' physical and mental health status as good, reasonable or poor based on the information they provided about their past and current health history.
- 15.123** All 24 witnesses reported either good or reasonable physical health circumstances, 10 of whom described themselves as experiencing good physical health without any particular health problems that affected their day-to-day functioning.
- 15.124** Fourteen (14) witnesses were categorised as having a reasonable level of physical health. They reported histories of ongoing illness and physical complaints that have had some impact on their everyday functioning, but were not debilitating. Three (3) of the witnesses reported having digestive problems that required surgery. Two (2) other witnesses reported that they have been treated for cancer and a further five witnesses reported suffering with arthritis, kidney problems, and the physical symptoms associated with an eating disorder.
- 15.125** Four (4) of the 14 witnesses who described reasonable health circumstances reported physical impairments as a result of congenital deformities and childhood illnesses, including polio. In each instance the witness reported that their physical disability has had negative consequences and affected their availability for work to varying degrees.
- 15.126** Witnesses who reported being abused in foster care reported more mental health difficulties than physical health concerns.
- 15.127** Seven (7) witnesses, three male and four female, described poor mental health circumstances and reported being hospitalised for the treatment of depression and suicide attempts, recently and in the past. Several witnesses described themselves as having nervous dispositions and being in need of ongoing professional support. They also reported that their ability to work and maintain positive social relationships has been restricted by their mental health difficulties.
- 15.128** Seven (7) witnesses reported their mental health as good, three of them described experiencing low moods at times but being generally able to maintain a positive attitude. Ten (10) witnesses gave accounts of reasonably stable mental health. They described themselves as suffering with depression or anxiety attacks either currently or in the past, which they manage with the assistance of counselling, medication and other types of support.
- 15.129** Among the witnesses who reported being abused in foster care a higher proportion of female witnesses reported receiving in-patient psychiatric treatment and a higher proportion of male witnesses reported having either considered or attempted taking their own lives.

Effects on adult life

- 15.130** Witnesses who reported being abused in foster care frequently commented on their inability to trust people and the damaging effect this had on their interpersonal and social relationships. They also reported feelings of loneliness, isolation and worthlessness. Witnesses who had spent most of their childhood and adolescence in foster care reported being '*alone in the world*' when they left their foster homes, accentuating the sense of isolation they had previously experienced:

A lot of people think it's just talk is going to solve the problem but it's not, who are you going to talk to?... I've had flats years ago but I've walked out of them because of loneliness. A lot of people go to the drink... if I had a wish I'd wish I could have a home that nobody could put me out of, and I'd wish I could have people around me. I can't go to the foster parents and say "will you be my friend?"... there's no place for me, not even on the streets.

15.131 The following table highlights the areas of difficulty described by eight male and 16 female witnesses, in the order of frequency reported:

Table 87: Reported Effects on Adult Life – Male and Female Witnesses Foster Care

Male witnesses		Female witnesses	
Effects on adult life*	Number of reports	Effects on adult life*	Number of reports
Counselling required	5	Counselling required	12
Abuse not easily forgotten	4	Lack of self-worth	9
Lack of trust	4	Lack of trust	9
Loner	4	Loner	8
Suicidal feelings or attempt	4	Tearfulness	7
Aggressive behaviour – verbal	3	Feeling isolated	7
Angry	3	Post-traumatic effect	7
Feeling different from peers	3	Anxious and fearful	6
Feeling isolated	3	Mood instability	6
Lack of self-worth	3	Feelings related to being a victim	5
Substance abuse	3	Nightmares	5
Withdrawal	3	Suicidal feelings or attempts	5
Aggressive behaviour – physical	2	Withdrawal	5
Anxious and fearful	2	Abuse not easily forgotten	4
Mood instability	2	Issues of needing approval	4
Overprotective of children	2	Overly compliant behaviour	4
Aggressive behaviour – psychological	1	Sexual problems	4
Alcohol abuse	1	Somatic symptoms	4
Tearfulness	1	Alcohol abuse	3
Fear of failure	1	Angry	3
Feelings related to being a victim	1	Feelings related to being powerless	3
Nightmares	1	Issues of self-blame	3
Post-traumatic effect	1	Sleep disturbance	3
Sexual problems	1	Unable to settle	3
Sleep disturbance	1	Unable to show feelings to children	3
Unable to settle	1	Feeling different from peers	2
Unable to show feelings to children	1	Substance abuse	2

Source: Confidential Committee of CICA, 2009

*Witnesses could report more than one effect and female witnesses reported a wider variety of effects

15.132 Nine (9) witnesses reported experiencing suicidal thoughts or behaviour in addition to descriptions of mood fluctuations and tearfulness. Problems associated with sleep disturbance, anxiety, social withdrawal and anger were reported by more than a quarter of all the witnesses.

If I had an argument with somebody,... (I would think)... should I hit the person or...Now I wouldn't, I think it could be to do with maturity. Years ago if somebody stood in my path, yes... (I would hit them)...and I'm amazed that I haven't ended up in prison.



I suffered depression... I have attempted suicide. When I was 15...I took a load of tablets belonging to ...foster mother...I didn't know what half of them were. I went to bed and took them and said "this is it" in my own head and the following morning then I woke up and I'm still here...and then about 2 or 3 years ago everything got on top of me again and I took an overdose again.

- 15.133** Seventeen (17) of the 24 witnesses reported having received counselling to help them deal with these and other issues. Many witnesses commented that access to counselling has only been available to them in recent years, with generally positive effects. Witnesses also remarked they became more aware of their need for help to deal with their past experiences as they got older, while stating it was often difficult to take the first step

I just completely suppressed everything, had forgotten everything... then everything started coming back to me. I never had counselling, I never had anyone to talk to... I was threatening for some time that I was going to do something... (about it)... I needed to get my head sorted out... and I suppose I didn't want to face up to it either at the same time.

- 15.134** With the exception of a small number of instances where social workers were reported to have been involved in supervising foster placements in more recent years, the Committee heard consistent reports of widespread neglect of witnesses' physical, emotional and developmental needs while placed in foster care. This neglect was compounded by a lack of assistance and support in the process of leaving care.

When I was 15 I thought someone, other than...foster mother...would plan my life, or say "we'd get you a decent job" or say "this is what happens now"...

- 15.135** Eleven (11) of the 16 witnesses who were discharged from foster placements when they were 15 years old reported that few arrangements or provisions were made for their subsequent support. They described being treated, in some instances, as 'slaves', without any regard for their developmental and emotional needs. There were eight accounts of witnesses being placed with elderly, childless foster parents for the purpose, they believed, of providing assistance and company for the foster parents. Accounts were heard of relatives ejecting witnesses from the foster homes where they had been placed as young children, when a foster parent died, without regard for their future welfare. In those instances where the witnesses were over 16 years old they were no longer the responsibility of the social services. They had remained living in their foster homes because they had nowhere else to go or it was mutually convenient for them to remain with their elderly foster parents.

