



Health
Information
and Quality
Authority

An tÚdarás Um Fhaisnéis
agus Cáilíocht Sláinte

10 YEARS OF REGULATING AND MONITORING

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

Summary for children and young people



2014 - 2024

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Introduction

This report is a summary of the Health Information and Quality Authority's (HIQA's) experience of inspecting children's social services over the last 10 years. This includes services run by The Child and Family Agency (Tusla) and foster care services run by other organisations (non-statutory foster care services) on behalf of Tusla.

This report follows the pathway of a child's journey through care. This usually begins when they first come into contact with local child protection and welfare services. When someone is worried about a child or young person, they are referred to Tusla so they and their family can get support. Most of these children stay living with their parents or with other family members. However, some of children cannot be safely cared for in their homes. Sometimes, it is best for a child to be placed with a foster family, in a children's residential centre or a special care unit.

During the summer of 2024, HIQA held an art competition for children and young people. Children and young people designed a poster on the theme of 'Hear my voice', as the care and support of children is at the core of what we do.

Many great entries were submitted. The winner of the competition was a 15-year-old who avails of residential centre. Their artwork is on the front cover of this report.

What does HIQA do?

Sometimes children and their families need support to make sure children are safe and cared for. This support can come from different services throughout Ireland. It is the responsibility of the people supporting these families to provide good quality care to children and young people.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) checks some of these services. We check to make sure that they are doing everything they should to help children and young people who need their support. This includes making sure that they are following the certain rules. These are called standards and regulations.

We carry out these checks in lots of different ways, such as meeting or speaking with children and their families, or visiting the services to inspect it. We also regularly ask for information from services to get a picture of how well they are working. Sometimes people contact us with information about a service. All the information we receive is meaningful and we use it to help us decide how we check on services.

We inspect:

- Child protection and welfare services
- Foster care services
- Children's residential centres
- Special care units
- Oberstown Children Detention Campus.

Message from the Chief Inspector of Social Services



Hello, my name is Carol Grogan and I am the Chief Inspector of Social Services in HIQA. My job is to make certain that children and young people get a safe and good quality service when they need it. I do this by making sure that these services are regularly checked by inspectors. Inspectors make sure that the provider and staff working with children are doing everything they should to help children and young people and keep them safe. We also check that children are supported by foster carers and staff who can take good care of them.

I am happy to share this overview report which describes our experience of inspecting children's social services over the last 10 years. The child and family agency (Tusla) was set up in 2014. There have been a lot of changes to how services are run since then. Most services have become more focused on children's rights. HIQA has promoted children's rights and provided training to all of our inspectors on children's rights and we found that most of the time, children are listened to and encouraged to be involved in decisions about their lives.

Children in residential care services run by Tusla are provided with good care, and many parts of the care given to children is now better. Examples of this include children being able to decorate their bedrooms and residential centres being more homely and suitable for young people. We have also found that most children in foster care are receiving better care and support. There are better supports for foster carers in Tusla and non-statutory foster care services (foster care services run by other organisations other than Tusla).

However, there are still some challenges in children's social services that need more work. Over the years, children have told us that it is very important for them to be able to build trusting relationships with the staff that they meet with. However, there are not enough social workers and social care workers for all children to be able to do this. There are also not enough foster care and residential placements for all the

children who need them. One of the biggest challenges for Tusla is making sure that all children receive the right service at the right time.

While a huge amount of work has been done since 2014, more work is needed to ensure that Tusla can meet the needs of all children who need their help at the time that they need it. Tusla needs support from other organisations to help it have enough staff to work in their services.

I look forward to continuing to work closely with officials in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, other Government Departments, Tusla and non-statutory foster care providers on continuing to improve the services that children receive.

I want to thank all of the children, parents, foster carers and staff who have contributed to our work since 2014. I want to especially thank the child who won our recent art competition, whose winning entry is on the cover.



Carol Grogan

Chief Inspector of Social Services

Health Information and Quality Authority

Message from the Head of Programme for Children's Services



Hello, my name is Eva Boyle and I am the Head of Programme for Children's Services in HIQA. Carol is my boss. My job is to make sure that a team of children's inspectors check out all information that we get about services and that we visit children's services around the country. Our job as inspectors is to check if those services are supporting children and keeping them safe. You may have met some of our inspectors, as every year, they visit some children's residential centres, foster care services, child protection and welfare services and special care units. We write a report on all of the services we visit, and these reports can be found on our website at www.hiqa.ie. As Carol said, this report is an overview of our experience of inspecting Tusla services over the last 10 years.

A big part of our job is to look at the management systems in a service. This means we look at how managers run a service and how they make sure that what should be happening is happening. Without good management things can be missed and children and families may not get what they need. Management is one of the themes you will read about in this report.

We have also written about how children's services have got better over the last 10 years and what things still need to get better. You will read about what this means for the children and young people who use the service.

Talking to you is very important to us, and when we go on inspections, you can speak to an inspector and tell us about your experiences of the support and care you get. Since, 2023, we have spoken to more than 2,500 children and young people – and listening to what you have to say about services helps us to know what we need to focus on. Over, the last 10 years, we have tried different ways of getting your views, and next year, we will be looking at new ways to help us to get better at listening to your opinions.

I want to thank all of the children, young people, parents, foster parents and staff who gave their time to talk to us over the last 10 years and we look forward to hearing your experiences in 2025 and beyond.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Eva Boyle". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a thin horizontal line.

Eva Boyle

Head of Programme for Children's Services

Health Information and Quality Authority

Children's voices

Speaking with children and young people is important to us at HIQA. When we inspect a service, we talk to the children and young people using the service to hear about their experience. Children's views on what is working well or what could be better are very important for inspectors to hear. This helps us to get a better understanding of how the service is doing. You will be able to read what children told us about their experiences throughout this report.

Between 2014 and 2023, our inspectors had more than 2,500 conversations with children and young people.

We did this in a number of ways:



Face-to-face chats



Online focus groups



Chats on the phone



Children filling in surveys

At times, some children and young people choose not to speak with inspectors. When this happens, we can learn about their experiences by:



Observing children with their carers



Reading children's files



Speaking with children's carers or guardians




Encouraging children to draw pictures, write songs or poems to show how they feel about a service

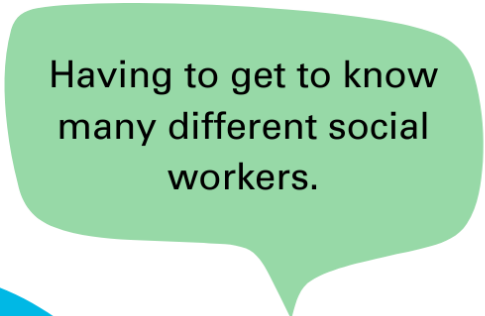
What children have told us about their experience of Tusla services

Most children say they are happy with the help or care Tusla have given them and their families. They like when they have a social worker but some children also told us about things that they do not like.


Some examples of what children said include:




Difficulties seeing
their social
workers.




Having to get to know
many different social
workers.



Being placed far from
their families and
communities.



Not having clear
plans for when they
leave care.



Experiencing or
seeing upsetting
incidents while living
in care.

"They [staff] make you feel involved."

"It is [centre] really good, I'm happy here."

"They are lovely and all."

"You can have an easy conversation with her. She listens and understands."

"I have talked to staff and felt heard."

"She cares and listens to me... wants to know what I think... she listens to what I want."

"I feel safe living here and staff talk to me about keeping safe."

HIQA's engagement with children

Improving how we engage with children and young people is very important to our work.

In 2016, we organised an art competition for children in residential services and special care units. The task was to design a thank-you card to send to children to thank them for meeting with HIQA staff during inspections. The winning design was made into a thank you card which was used until 2022.



During 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we organised a competition for children placed in residential, special care and Oberstown Detention Campus. The theme was 'Kindness during the pandemic'. Examples of the designs that children sent in can be seen below.



In 2019, we made a booklet for children called 'We want to hear from you'. This explains how to give feedback or make a complaint about a children's service and is available on our website.

In 2023, we met with children in residential centres to get their views on how HIQA could tell them about what they found on the inspection of their residential home. Children's feedback was used to develop a young person's report of each inspection.

In our overview reports, we write summaries for children and young people, sharing what they told us about their care.

During the summer of 2024, HIQA held an art competition for children and young people. Children and young people designed a poster on the theme of 'Hear my voice', as the care and support of children is at the core of what we do.

Many great entries were submitted. The winner of the competition was a 15-year-old who receives care in a children's residential centre. Their artwork is on the front cover of this report. The winning entries are shown below. All entries can be viewed on www.hiqa.ie.



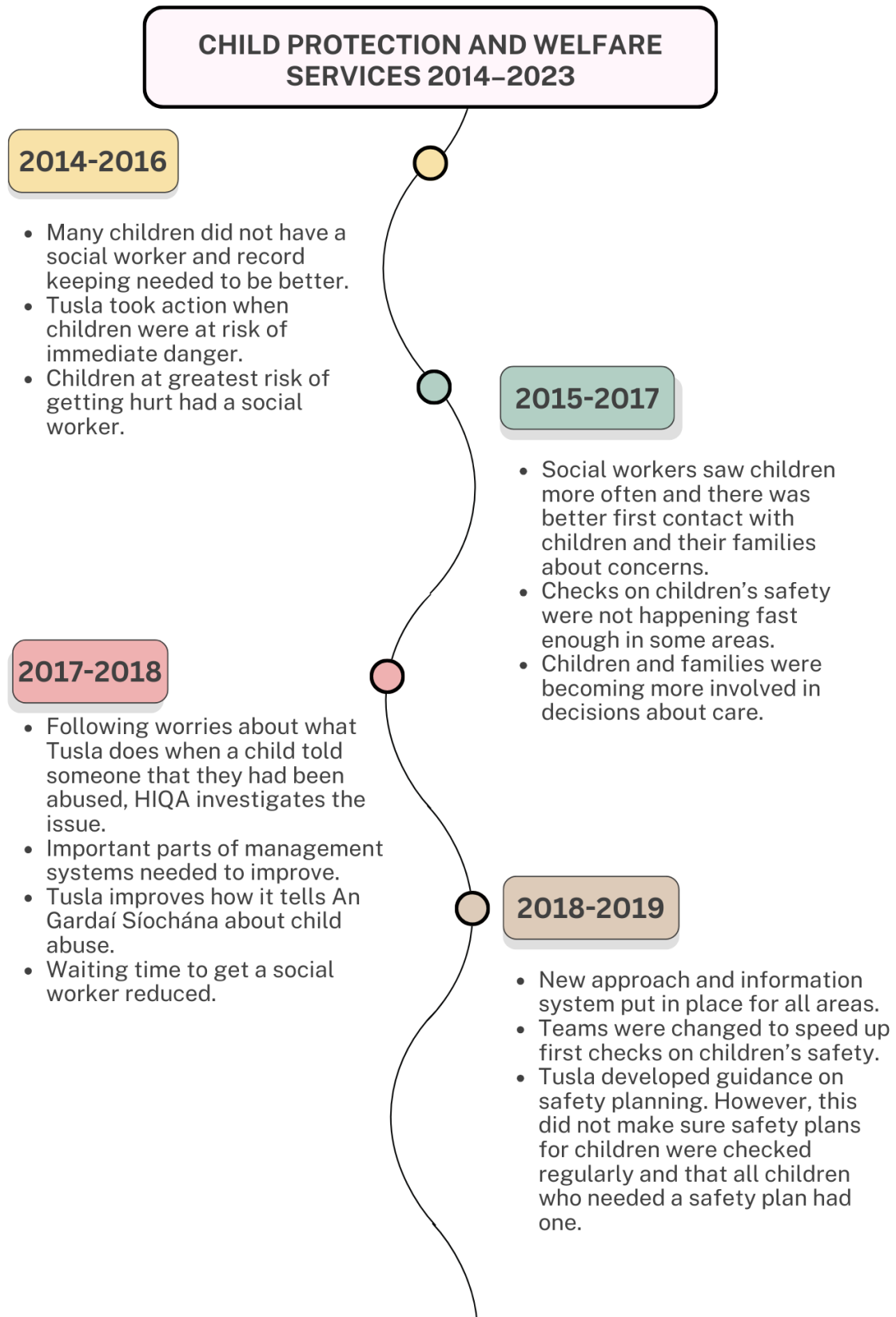
Child protection and welfare services

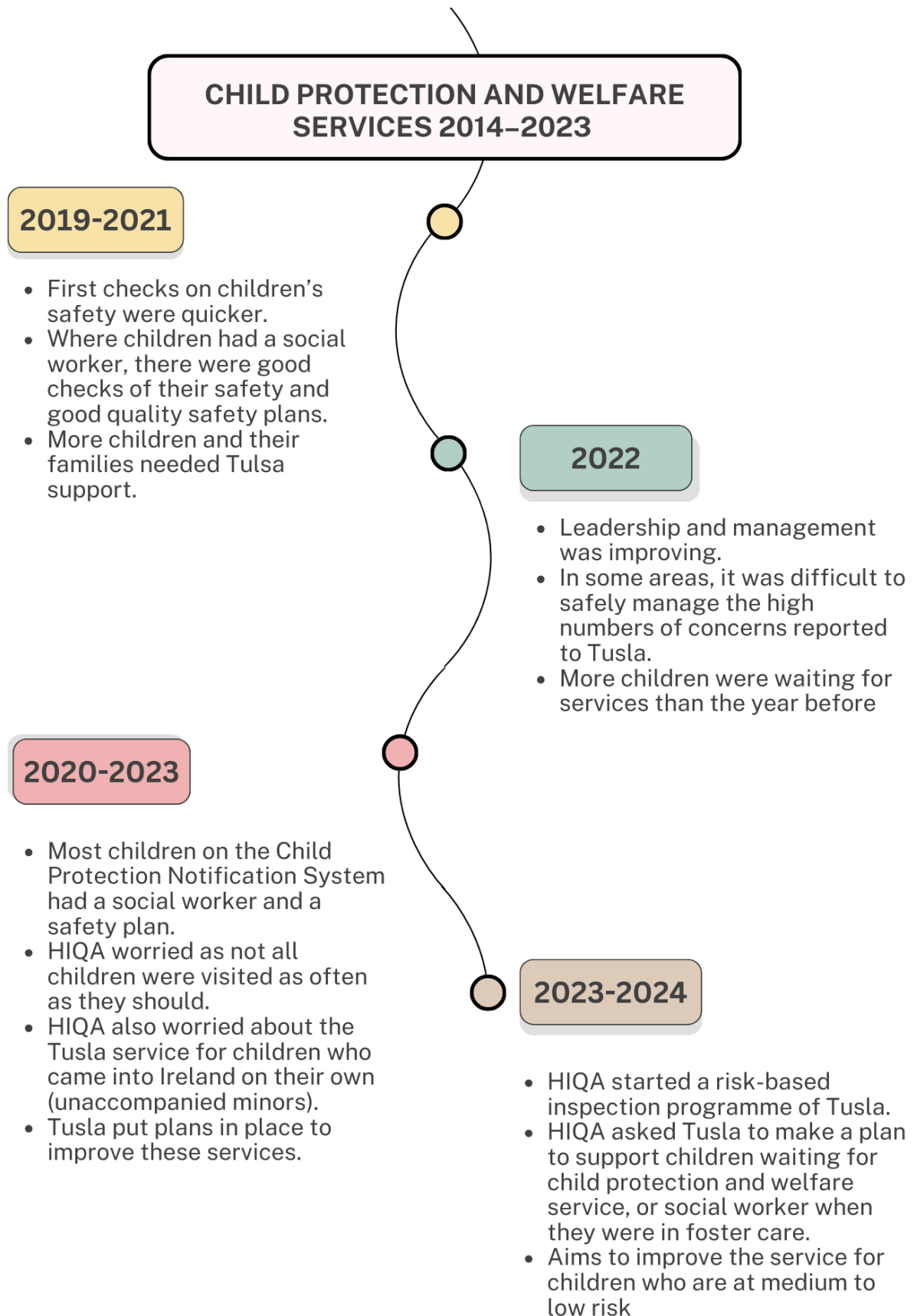
Child protection and welfare (CPW) services are very important for the safety and welfare of children. It is often a family's first time meeting with a social worker and the first chance for Tusla to help keep a child safe if needed. HIQA has carried out 66 inspections of CPW services in the 10 years between 2014 and 2023.

When someone is worried that a child is not safe or well cared for they can tell Tusla. This is called a referral. All referrals are read by a worker in Tusla. After this, a worker will carry out checks like talking to the person who made the referral, to decide what to do next. These checks should happen very quickly to see if a child is safe or not. If needed, a social worker will do more checks and speak with the child, their family and other people in the child's life. This takes longer. They do this to find out if a child is safe and well looked after. After all of these checks and meetings with the child and their family, the social worker may make a plan with them about what needs to happen to keep the child safe. This is called a safety plan. When social workers are very worried about a child, they are placed on what is called the Child Protection Notification System or CPNS.



A snapshot of our experience of child protection and welfare services 2014–2023:





What is working well?

The majority of children at highest risk are receiving a timely and good quality service.

When children receive a service, Tusla use child friendly ways of involving them in decisions about their life.

There is better use of technology.

Some Tusla services are better able to meet the standards than others.

What needs to improve?

In some areas, management systems need to be better.

More social workers and social care workers are needed.

Some children are waiting a long time to get a service from Tusla.

Some social workers have high caseloads which means they don't always have time to do all the work needed to keep all children safe.

What does this mean for children?

CPW services are usually a child's first contact with Tusla. It is really important that this happens at the right time and when children need it. Children involved with Tusla's CPW services over the past 10 years have not always had the service they needed at the right time. However, our inspections have found that children at serious and direct risk have been kept safe. Also children who have a social worker and or social care worker, have said good things about how they have helped them.

Child protection and welfare - what children told inspectors

"She asks for my opinion and involves me in meetings. She supports me and makes a difference."

"She asked me stuff like what I would like to happen, what I need and about my interests and feelings."

"I told that social worker everything about my situation then she was just gone."

"School has not been good with my situation but the social worker has said they will help with that.."

"Had about six [social workers] before I got this one.. just kept changing.. met loads of different ones and now getting another new one."

"Right now I am very happy...my life has completely changed because of my social care worker."

Child protection and welfare - what children told inspectors

"My social worker talks to me and I can trust them with what I say" and "they are helping us with our family."

"She cares and listens to me... wants to know what I think...she listens to what I want."

"She is a good one but not all of them were they all did not listen."

"I meet her on her own. She collects me and we go for hot chocolate or something."

"I like my social worker... she takes me out, otherwise I'd be stuck without anyone."

"You can have an easy conversation with her. She listens and understands."

"She is easy to talk to. It is what I like most."

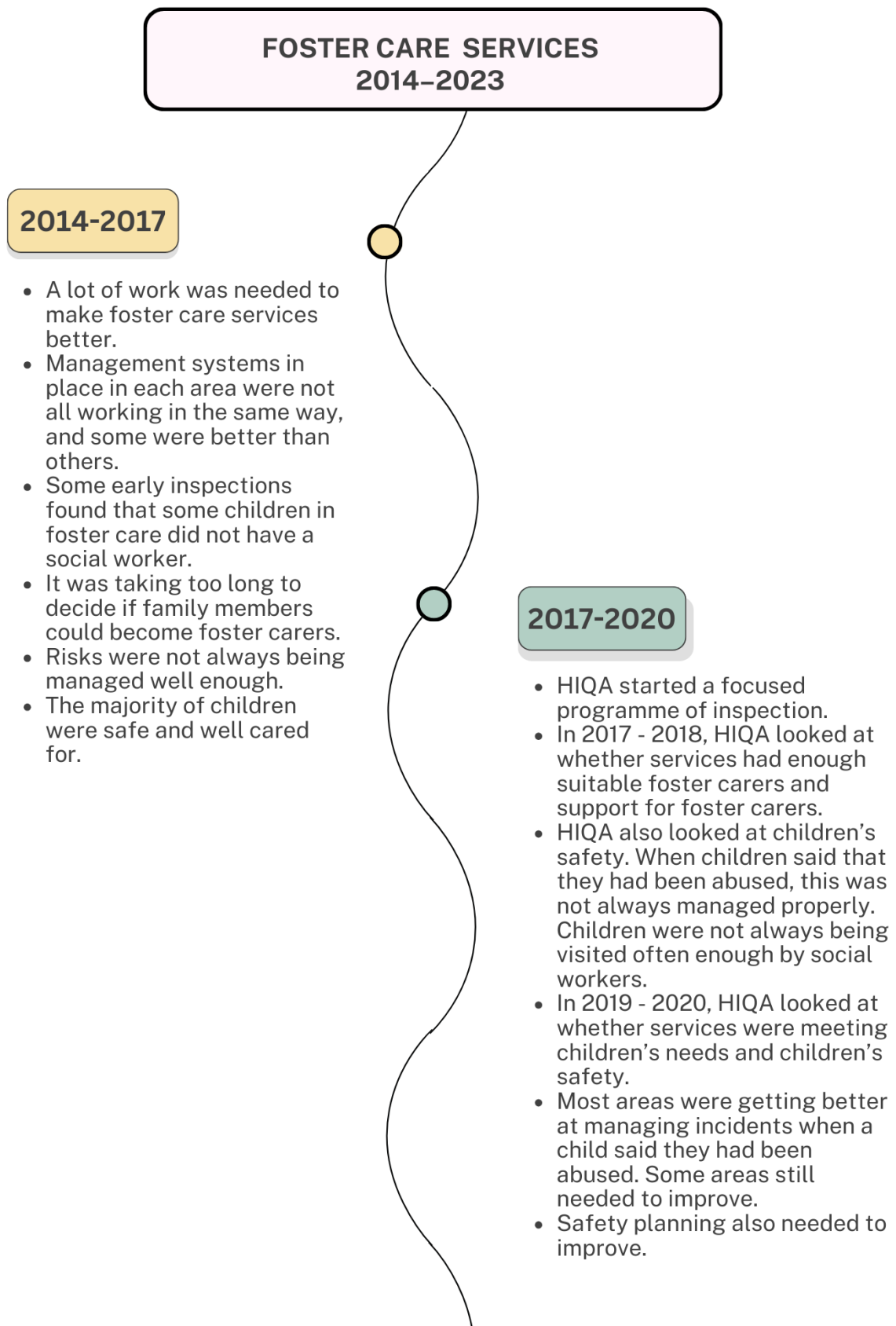
"She keeps me up to date. She keeps up with my wellbeing, what mood I'm in and if I am ok. I can give my opinion on things. She listens and tries to work around it."

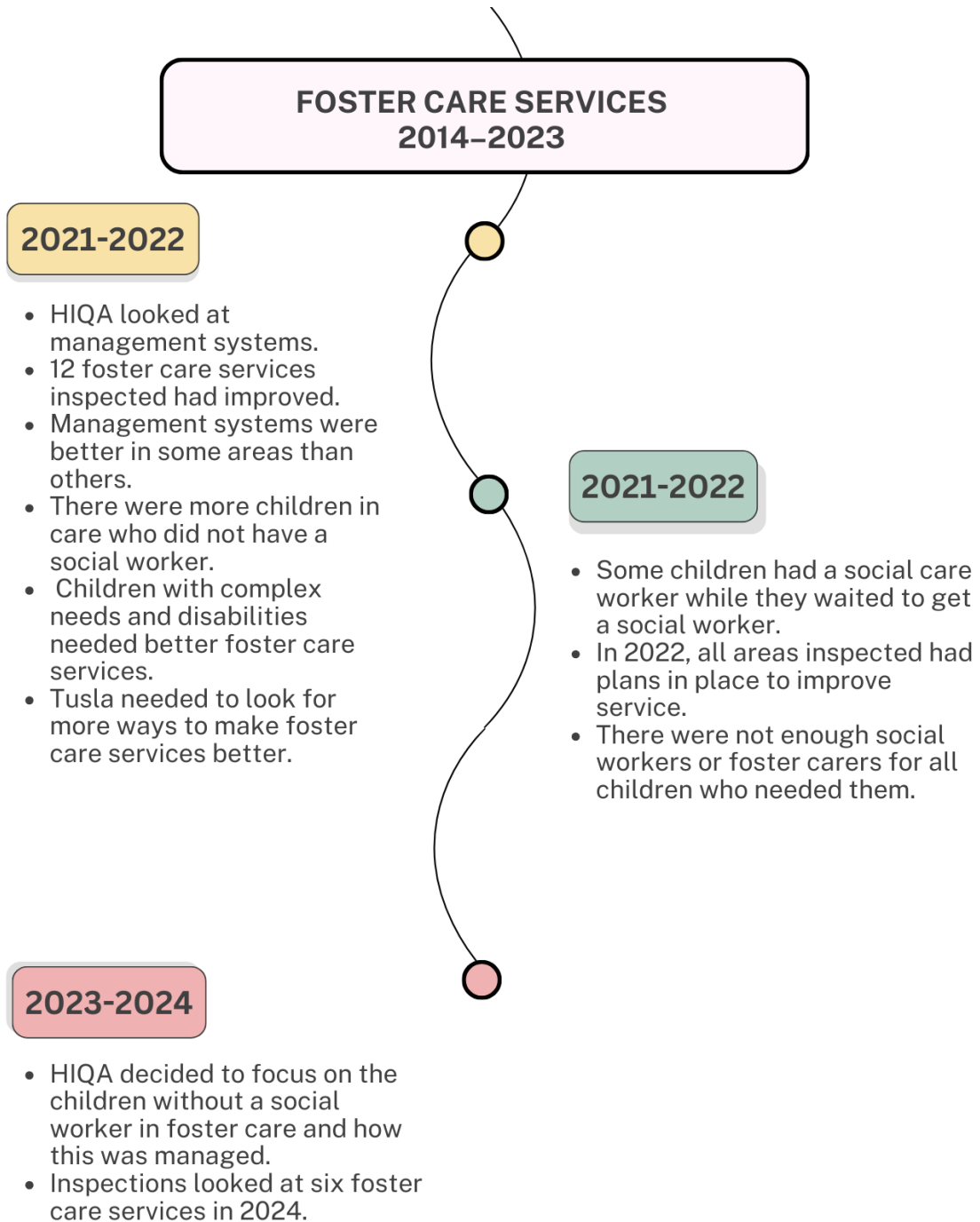
Foster care services

At times, when a child comes into contact with child protection and welfare services and cannot remain in the family home, they will move into a foster home. Most children in care live with foster carers. Sometimes these carers may be family members or other people the child knows well. This is called relative foster care. Other times, children may be placed with foster carers who they do not know. This is called general foster care.



A snapshot of our experience of foster care services 2014–2023:





Non-statutory foster care services

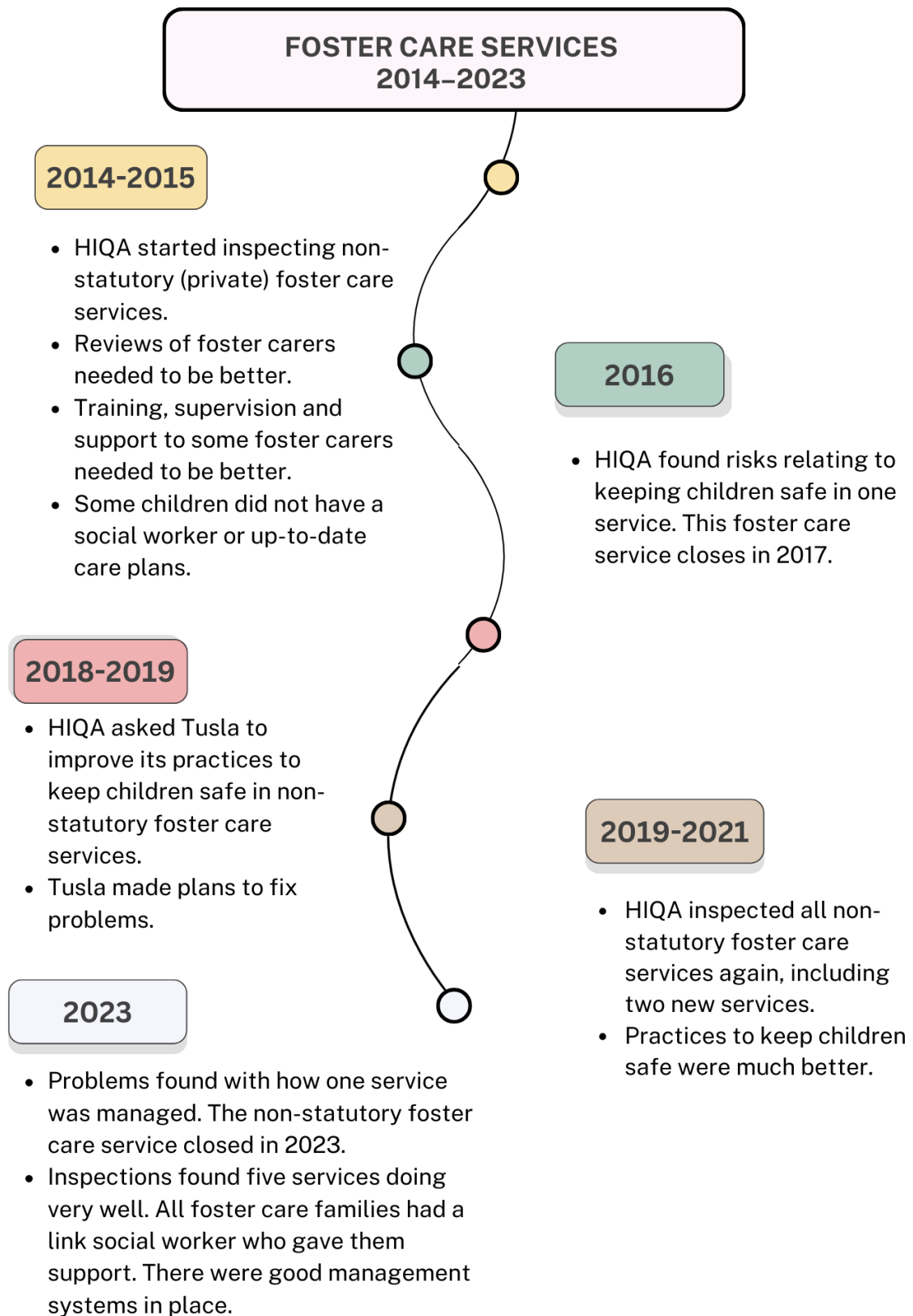
Sometimes, when a child cannot be placed with a foster family managed by Tusla, they are cared for in a foster family managed by a non-statutory foster care service. These are foster care services run by other organisations.

It is the non-statutory foster care service's job to find people who would like to be foster carers. They meet with these people to carry out checks to see if they would be suitable to care for children. They also help foster carers to look after the children in their care.

Children living with foster carers from a non-statutory foster care service should still have a social worker from Tusla who visits them and helps them.



A snapshot of our experience of non-statutory foster care services 2014-2023



What is working well?

There are better ways for matching children with the most suitable foster families.

There are better ways for reviewing voluntary care agreements for children in foster care.

There are better ways for making sure all foster carers and other adults in regular contact with children in foster care have up-to-date Garda vetting.

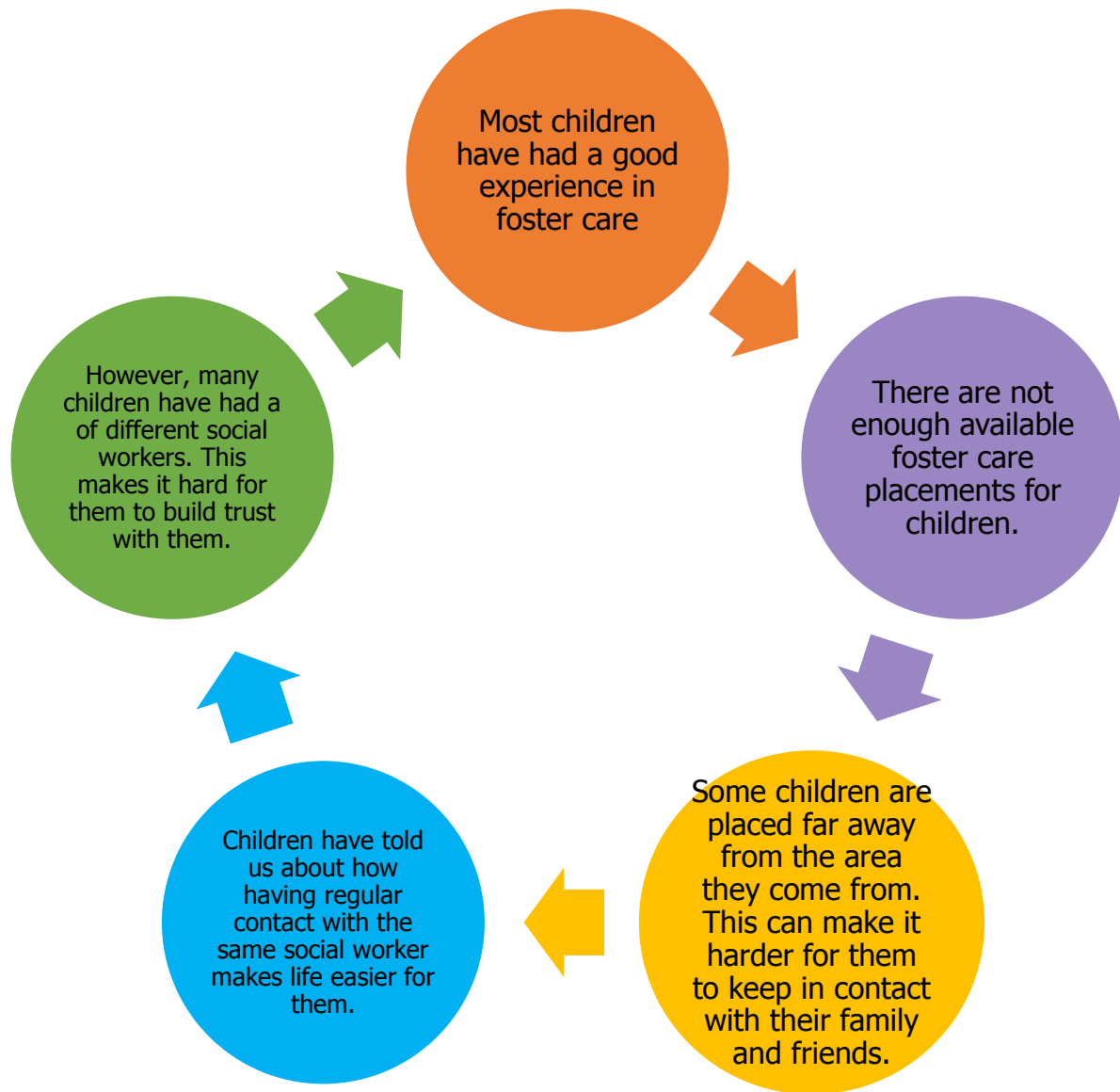
Reviews of foster carers happen more often and they are done better.

What still needs to improve?

More social workers are needed so that all children in foster care have a social worker.

More foster care placements are needed so that all children who need a foster care placement can have a suitable one that will best meet their needs.

What has this meant for children?



Foster care — what children and young people like

"They give me the love and things I need, they love me and are kind to me when I want to talk to them about stuff."

"I would like to be listened to more."

"I am really happy in my foster care and I feel safe."

"Everything - they are my parents."

"They are very nice and special."

"They are nice, they look after us and we have our own rooms. We go on days out, we have nice friends, we love the dogs, go on holidays. My foster family and my real family get on really well. I love everything."

"They support and understand me. They supply me with my favourite chocolate biscuits. They are the best."

"I feel very lucky to be a part of this family...I wouldn't change anything in my life."

Foster Care - Comments on social workers from children and young people

"I have had lots of social workers - eight in total."

"My social worker never listens to me."

"Social workers do not listen, sometimes they say no with no explanation."

"Too many kids in care for the amount of social workers."

"There have been a lot of changes of social worker. We need a consistent social worker we can rely on."

"My social worker is not good at keeping up with my culture."

Living in Foster Care - Comments on challenges faced

"My family do not keep in contact with me"

"Mostly I am bored"

"The [social worker] should try more to prepare me for home and listen to me."

"I am only...years old so this [child in care reviews] is all new to me."

"Going to school is not easy and it is sad you only get like one and a half hours to see your mam."

Living in Foster Care - Comments on challenges faced

"I would like to see my mam more."

"I do not like doing forms."

"I was scared at the start...but my foster family are good to me."

"I felt they did not listen to me. I have been struggling a lot."

"They said someone would be in touch in the next few weeks. I have not heard anything since then. It's a fairly slow process."

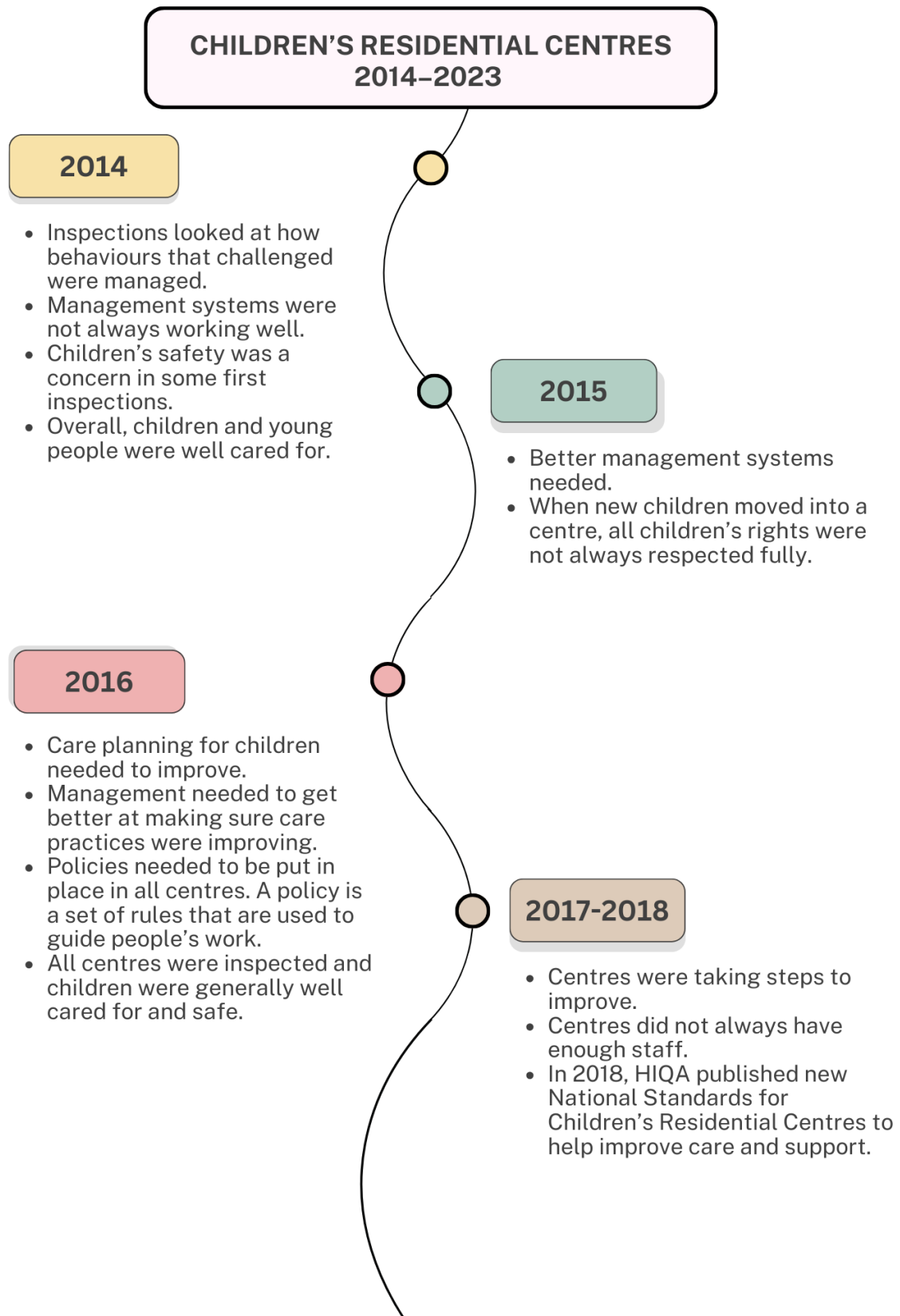
Children's residential centres

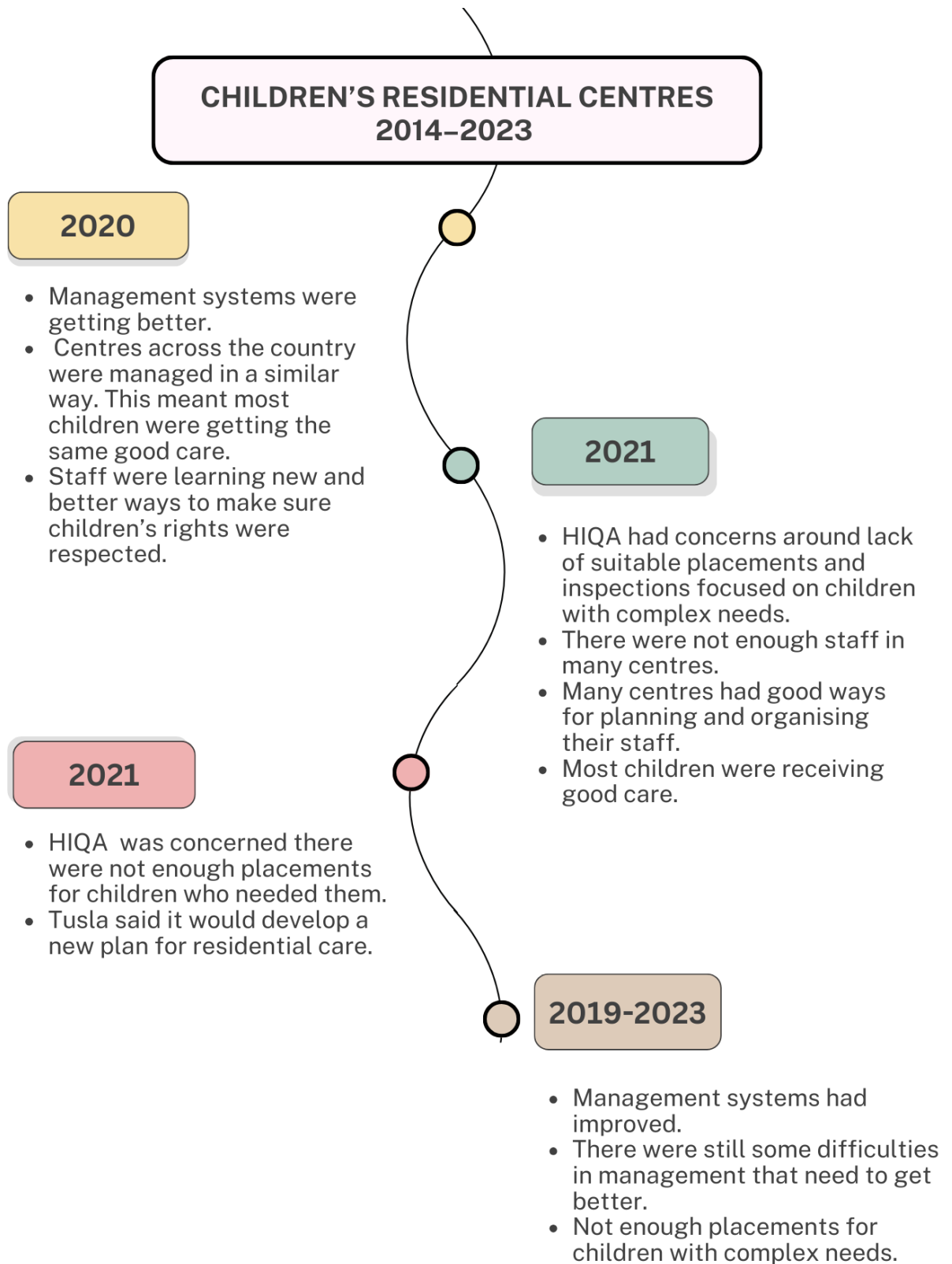
When a child cannot live at home and there are no foster care placements available which can meet their needs, they might live in a children's residential centre (CRC). These are normal houses in villages, towns and cities and sometimes in the countryside. The houses usually have between two and six children living there. These children attend local schools and take part in local sports and other hobbies. Children in these residential centres are cared for by social care workers.

HIQA carried out 246 inspections of CRCs in the 10 years between 2014 and 2023.



A snapshot of our experience of children's residential centres 2014–2023





What is working well?

The management of residential centres is better.

Management and staff have been learning new ways to do things better so that children have better care.

Managers in centres across the country are doing things the same way which means most children in residential care are getting the same good care.

What still needs to improve?

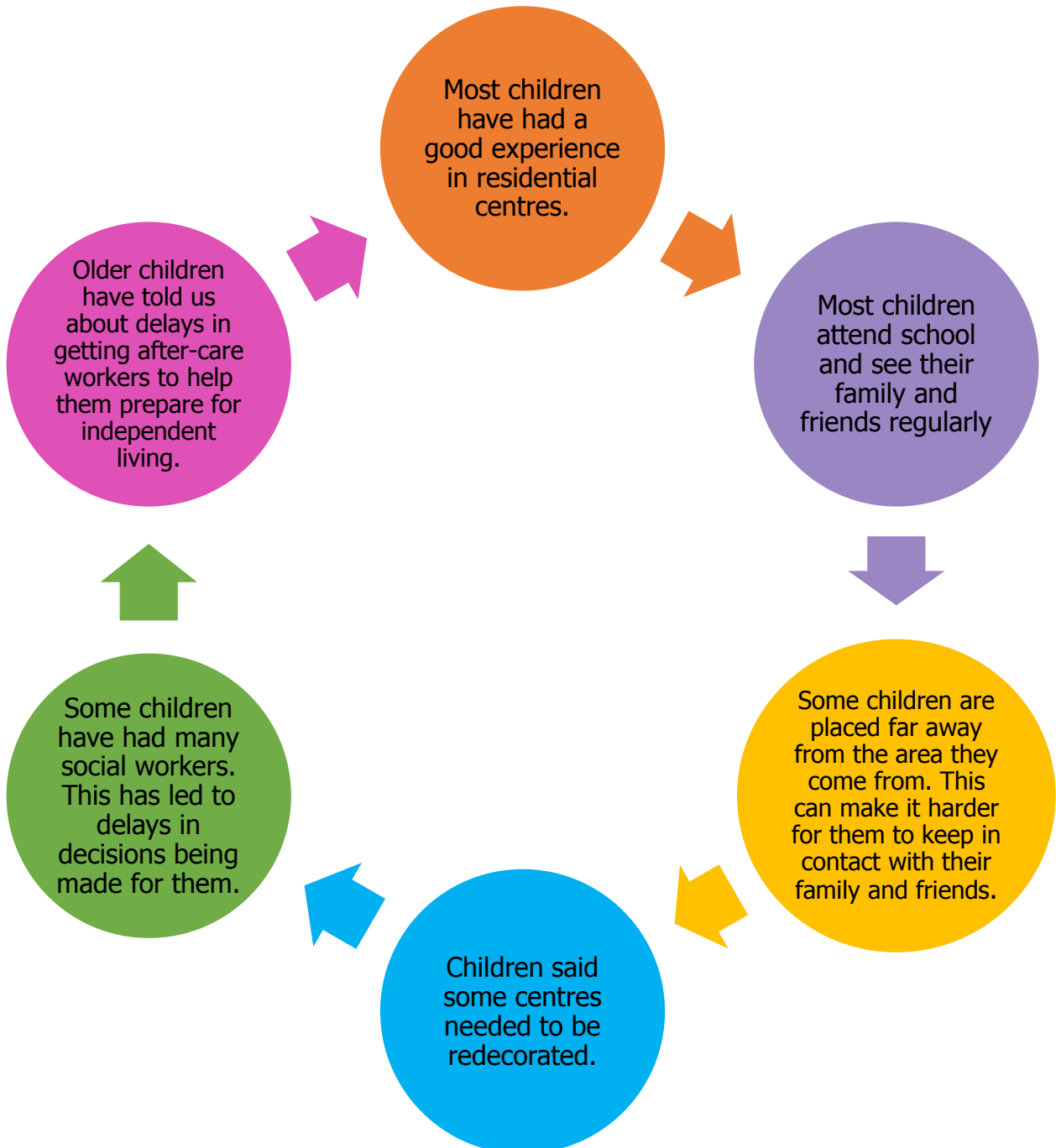
More social care workers are needed to work in residential centres.

Plans to build more residential centres have been slow.

HIQA does not inspect all children's residential services in Ireland.

There are not enough residential centres for all the children who need them.

What this meant for children?



Below we present a selection of feedback of what children living in CRCs told us throughout the past 10 years.

What children 'liked' about living in children's residential care

"You know you are welcome."

"I have talked to staff and felt heard."

"I am able to talk to staff."

"I feel safe living here and staff talk to me about keeping safe."

"They [staff] make you feel involved."

"It is [centre] really good, I'm happy here."

"We get to do fun stuff and I'm happy living here."

"It is not how they [young people] think it is, staff are nice, always there for you. You will not feel like a new kid, you will enjoy it."

"Very homely and comforting."

What children 'liked' about living in children's residential care

"Staff ask me what stuff I like to do, like the cinema or the arcade."

"Do washing by myself."

"There is nothing wrong with it."

"I like it here and they are [staff] there for you."

"Get pocket money."

"This place has supported me and done a lot for me."

"Can talk to staff if I am not feeling safe."

Was "a great place, get to do great fun stuff, other people should definitely come."

"They are lovely and all."

What children 'found hard' about living in children's residential care

"I have not seen my care plan."

"I do not like the rules of the house."

Saw their social worker
"sometimes."

"I do not know what the future plan is for me."

"I do not want to be here."

Staff "put veg in everything, I keep telling them no veg, no veg."

"This place is so different to a normal house."

"It looks like an old person's house. Give me the funds and I will do it, knock down some walls, paint it."

"It is up to staff - not us."

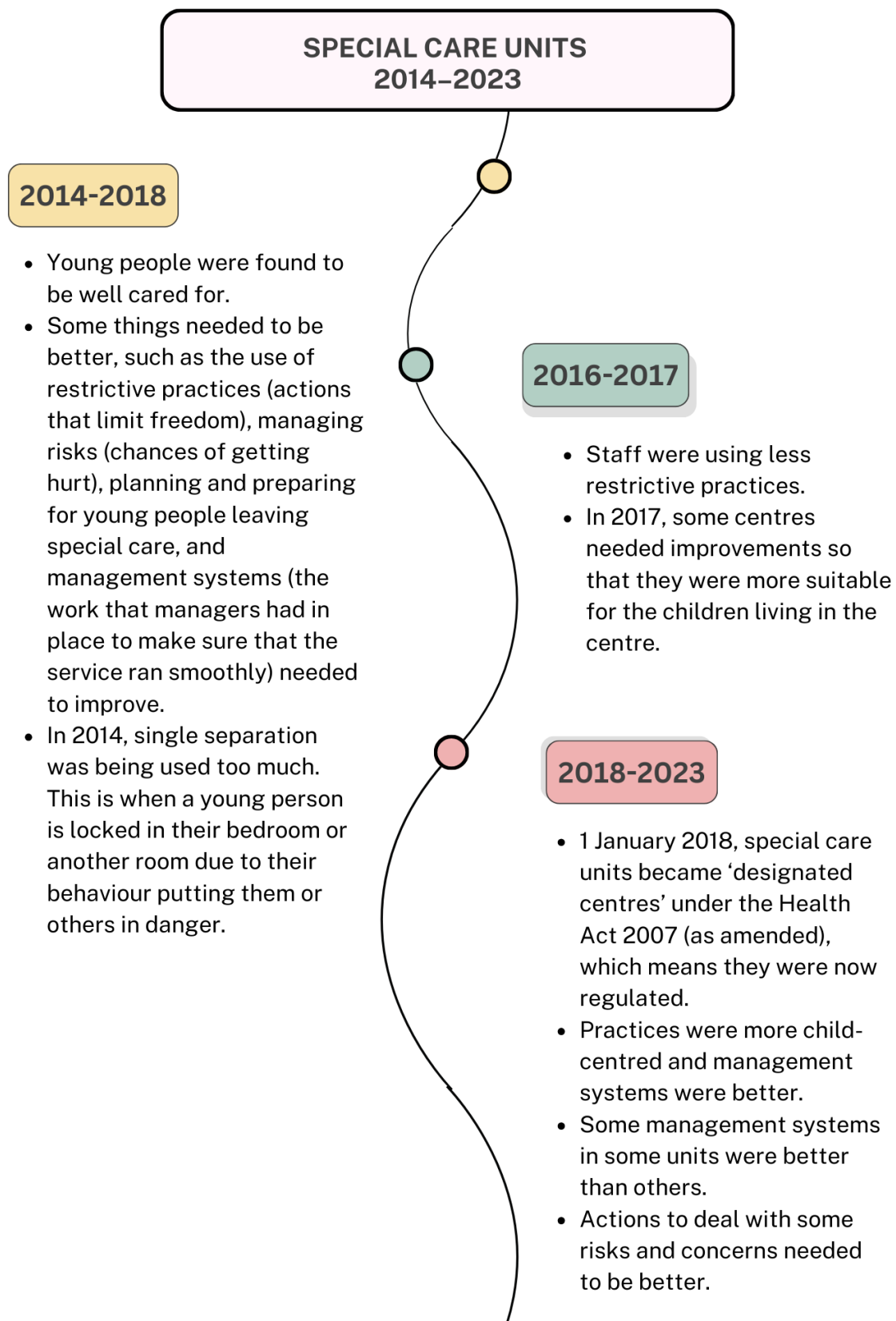
Special care units

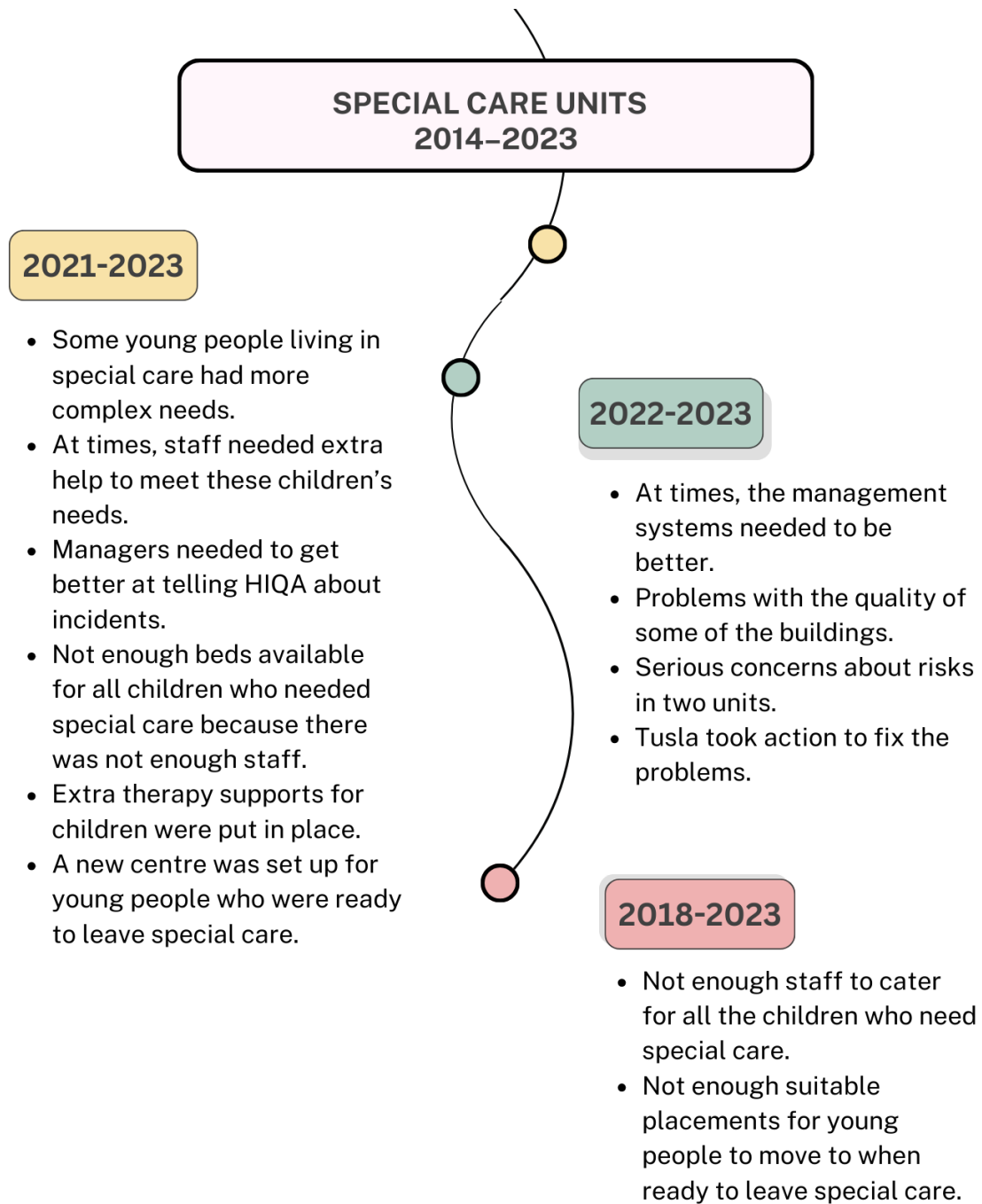
There are times for some children and young people when they cannot be cared for in the community. Children and young people are placed in special care units (SCUs) by a court when they require care and protection. This happens when their behaviour places them (or others) at risk of harm to their life, health, safety, development or welfare.

In 2018, special care units became designated centres. This means that the people running the centre, the person in charge and the provider have to follow specific rules set out in law. These are known as regulations.



A snapshot of our experience of special care units 2014–2023:





What is working well?

Restrictive practices were only used when there were concerns about safety.

Young people were listened to. They were involved in decisions about their care and about the unit they were living in.

Management structures in special care units have improved.

Young people were supported well with the things that are important to them such as seeing their families and taking part in activities that they enjoy.

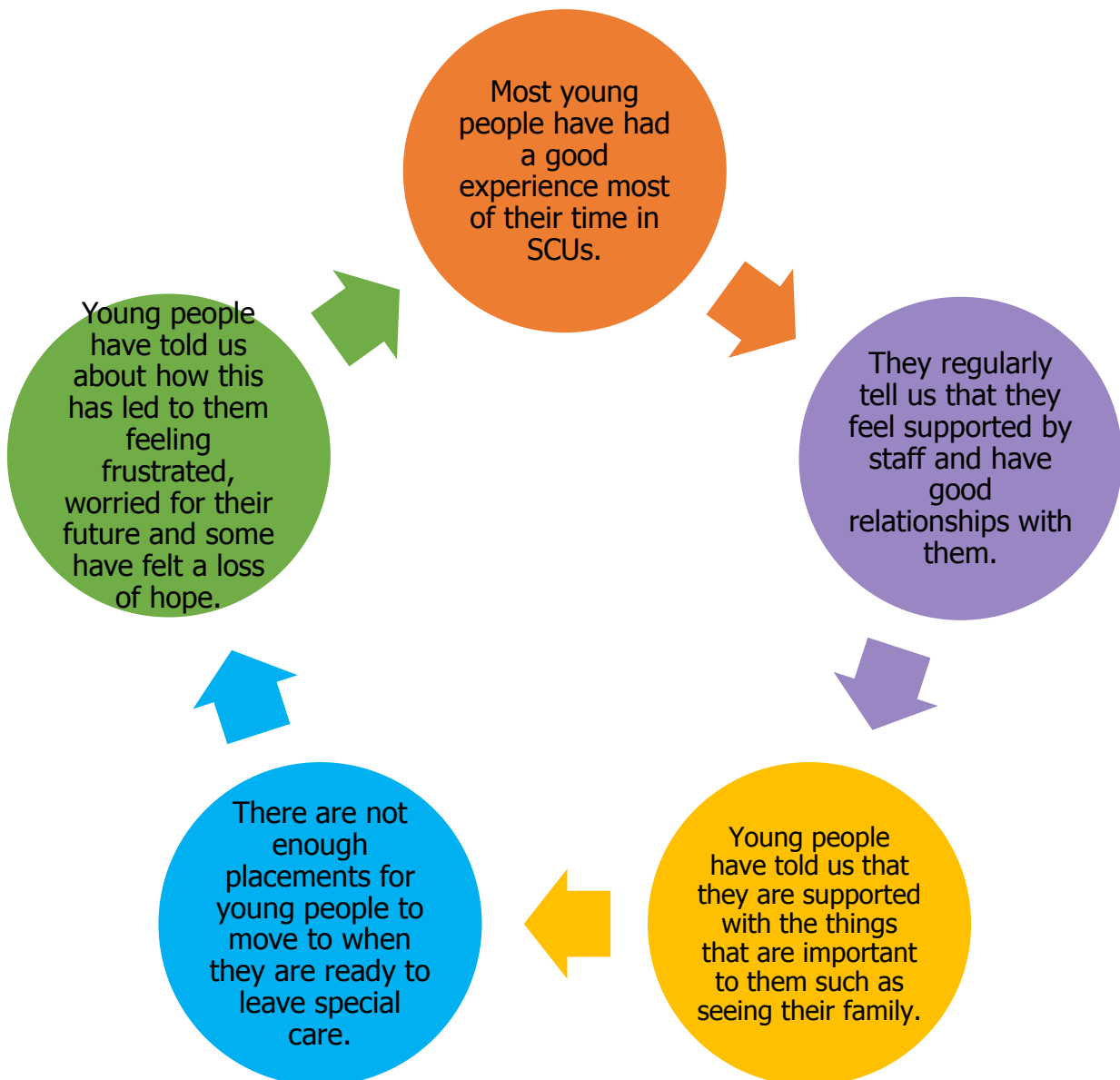
What still needs to improve?

All SCUs need to follow the regulations (rules) consistently.

More placements for young people that are ready to leave special care are needed.

More staff are needed so that all young people who require a special care placement can get one.

What has this meant for children?



What children 'liked' about living in special care

"It is an alright place to be."

"As good as it can be."

"It is good...like the rules"

"Staff were nice."

Helped them "tackle" individual "difficulties and issues."

"I really like it here but I know I have to move on."

"It [the centre] is not a place I ever wanted to go to but I am glad in a sense."

"Look at me now."

What children 'found hard' about living in special care

"If abscond you will be locked in."

"As good as it can be."

That "If you abscond it comes with consequences."

"Two to six weeks or eight weeks before you go out again."

"The minute I got a placement the last time, I did everything I had to do."

Had "lost hope for their future."

"You get depression in here, it makes you worse, it does not help and it is disgusting here"

"Got boring going out with the adults all the time, teenagers do not want this."

"Management make the decisions, it is different every time. It depends on what happened [while you were on abscond], the risk of it happening again and the danger."

"It is an alright place to be."

What is next?

Positive developments in children's services

Despite the challenges that inspectors have found in children's services, there are a lot of things that have improved over the past 10 years. These include:

- ✓ Services are more focused on children's rights
- ✓ There are better policies in place
- ✓ There is much better use of technology
- ✓ When children have a social worker, they say they receive a good service
- ✓ Most children at highest risk are getting a timely and good service
- ✓ There have been many improvements in foster care services. For example, there are better ways for reviewing voluntary care agreements and better ways for making sure all foster carers and relevant adults have up-to-date Garda vetting
- ✓ The management systems in children's residential centres and special care units are better
- ✓ Managers and staff in children's residential services and special care units are learning ways to improve practice to make these services better for children

Current challenges

While our inspectors have seen improvements across Tusla services over the past 10 years, there is still work to do if children are to get better, more child-centred care services.

Some of the main challenges that need to be tackled are:

There are social work and social care vacancies across all types of Tusla services. This means that many children are waiting for a service from Tusla.

There are not enough placements for children who are ready to leave special care.

Children have to stay in special emergency arrangements when there are no other placements available, sometimes for long periods. These placements are not inspected by HIQA.

What is next?

Tusla told HIQA that it is planning to change how it allocates social workers to children and families.

Tusla also plans to change how it delivers services in 2025.

HIQA requested that Tusla's management team create an improvement plan to reduce the number of children on waiting lists. HIQA has completed 10 inspections to see how this improvement plan is going. This report will be on our website later in 2025.

Tusla plans to open new children's residential services in 2024 and 2025.

What is required going forward?

Organisations should work together to look at how we can best support children and families.

Tusla, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of Further and Higher Education and universities to continue to work together to make sure there are enough staff to work in children's services.

More places in foster care, residential care and special care to meet children's needs.

Start the part of the law (Health Act 2007) which would allow us to start inspecting all children's residential centres.

Review of the Child Care Act 1991 to be finished and new regulations related to children in foster care to be created.

Approval by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth of the Draft Overarching National Standards for the Care and Support of Children using Health and Social Services and the Draft National Standards for Children's Social Services.

Once the new standards are approved, we will work with Tusla, non-statutory foster care services and others to help services to work with these new standards (ways of working).

Conclusion

HIQA has met with many children and listened to their experiences of care to find out what is working well and what could be better. While many parts of children's services are working well and have improved, there are still big challenges that are having an impact on some children. For example, not all children get a social worker when they need one. The management systems in children's services also need to be stronger to make sure children are safe and receiving good quality care. HIQA will continue to work with Tusla to address these challenges to make sure that children are receiving the best possible service.



Health Information and Quality Authority

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