

National Advocacy Service Report

2023



empowering people in care



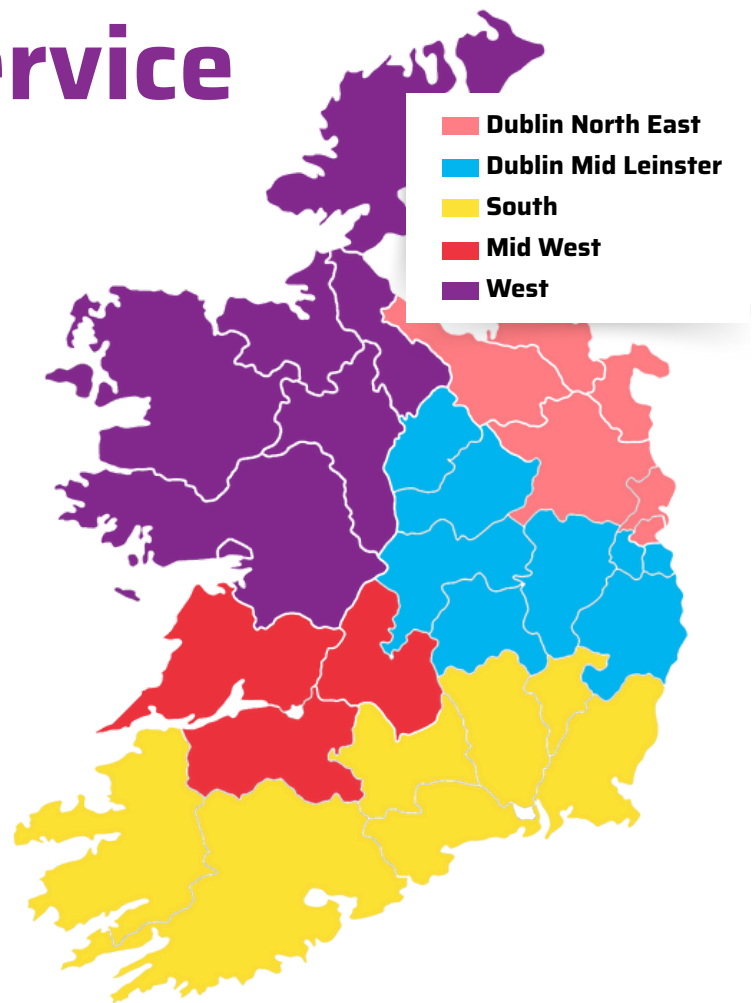
National Advocacy Service

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At the end of 2023, there were 5,615 children in the care of the state in Ireland, and 2,904 young people in aftercare services. They are not always visible, their voices are seldom heard in society, and they can be overlooked in public policy discussions that directly affect their lives.

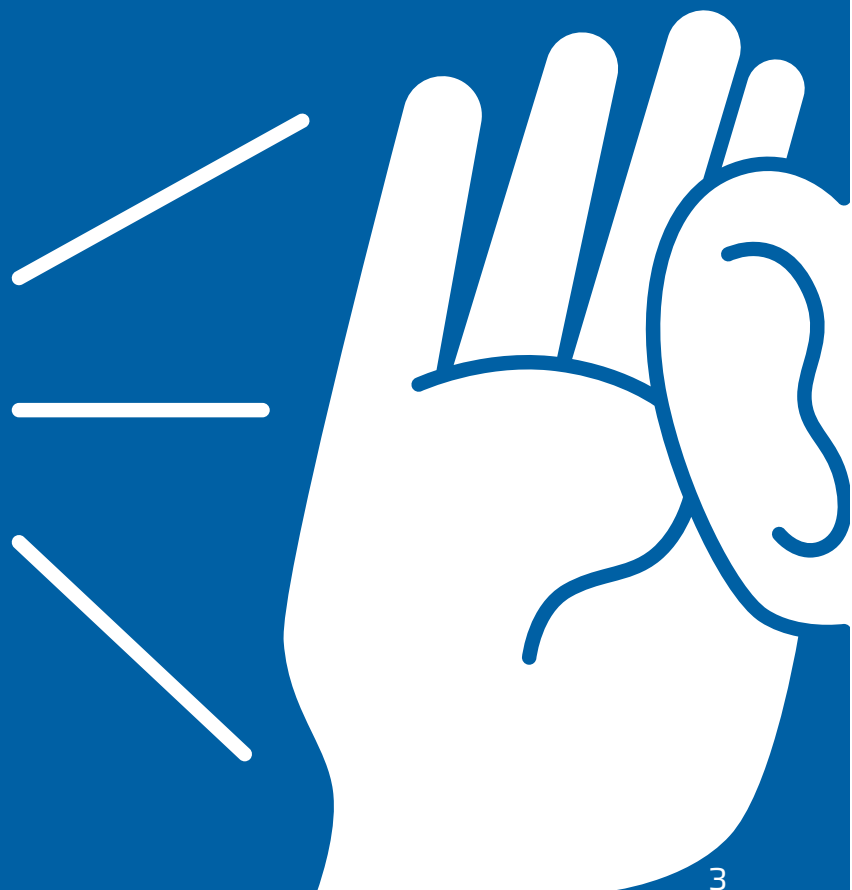
Who we are

EPIC, Empowering People in Care works with children and young people that have experience of the care system, up to the age of 26. We exist because some children and young people need extra help or support arising from their experiences in care.

We are independent, with a single purpose and a clear mandate. We are child-focused and build trusted relationships with care-experienced children and young people, whose lived experience informs our advocacy, policy, and research.

Our team works with care-experienced children and young people across Ireland to make sure their voices are central to decisions that affect their lives. We create safe spaces for children and young people to come together to share their experiences and work on projects and campaigns that are important to them.

All of EPIC's work is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 12, which provides for the right to be heard and to participate in decision making.



Strategic Goal No. 1



Providing quality, effective and independent rights-based advocacy directly to care experienced children and young people up to age 26.

Taken from EPIC's Strategic Plan 2022-2027

Objectives

- 1.1** Ensure more care-experienced children and young people know about EPIC's National Advocacy Service and their rights while in care or aftercare.
- 1.2** Build the case for independent advocacy to be enshrined in law.
- 1.3** Meet the needs of care-experienced children and young people through enhanced partnerships.
- 1.4** Deliver a best-in-class direct advocacy model informed by the experience of children and young people.

Vision

A society where every child in the care system is valued, respected and heard.



Values



Empowering

Rights-Based

Inclusive

Ambitious

Mission

To champion the rights of care-experienced children and young people, ensure their voices inform the policy and practice that affects their lives and cultivate a care aware society.



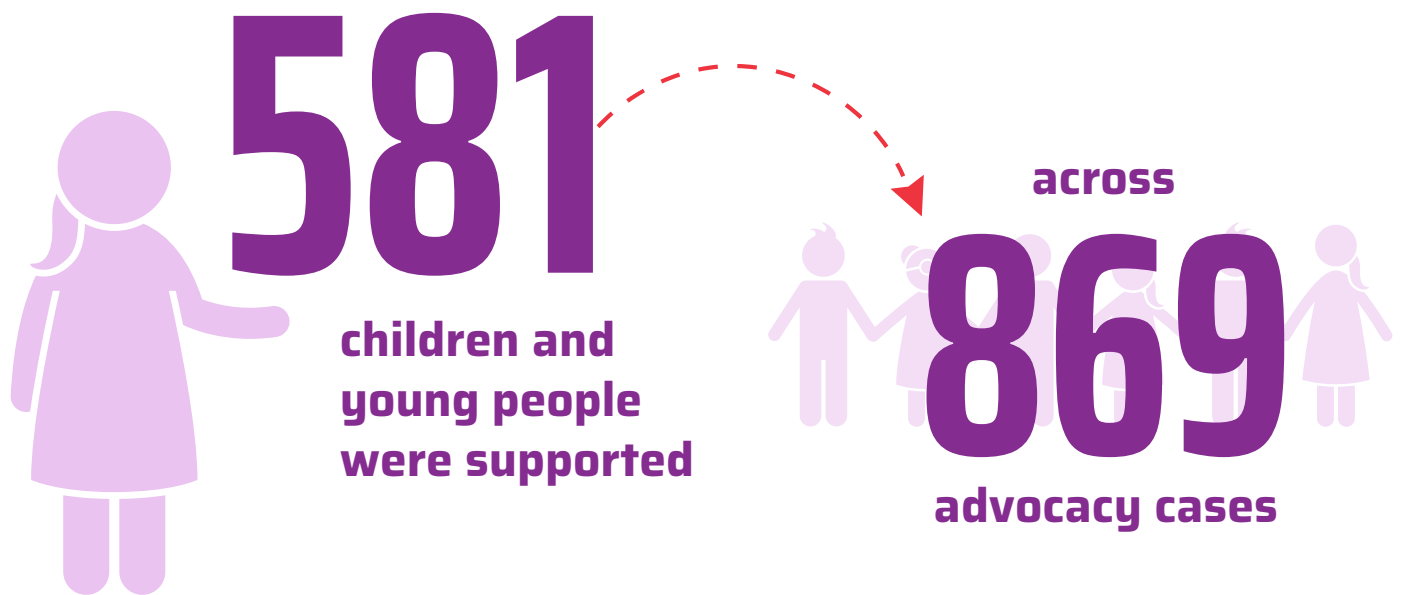
Acknowledgements

The Management Team and staff of EPIC thank Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, for funding this Service, as well as all those who have supported EPIC to deliver the Service throughout 2023. We would also like to thank the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for their collaboration and engagement. Our project partnership with Community Law and Mediation (CLM) continued in 2023, delivering free legal advice clinics to children and young people with care experience. The CLM-EPIC partnership continues with support from, and in collaboration with, Tusla's Office of Legal Services.

The efficacy of our Advocacy Service is dependent on collaboration with a wide variety of individuals, organisations, and services in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. We acknowledge the many professionals with whom we work that are dedicated to meeting the needs of care-experienced children and young people. We especially wish to acknowledge the children and young people who came through our Advocacy Service in 2023, whose experiences and challenges are documented throughout this report.

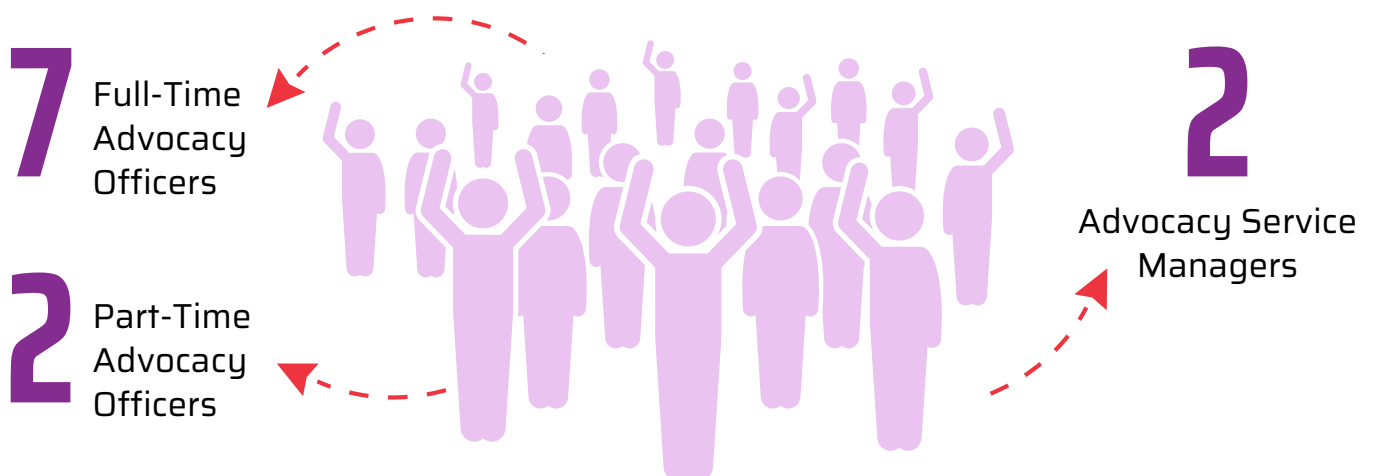
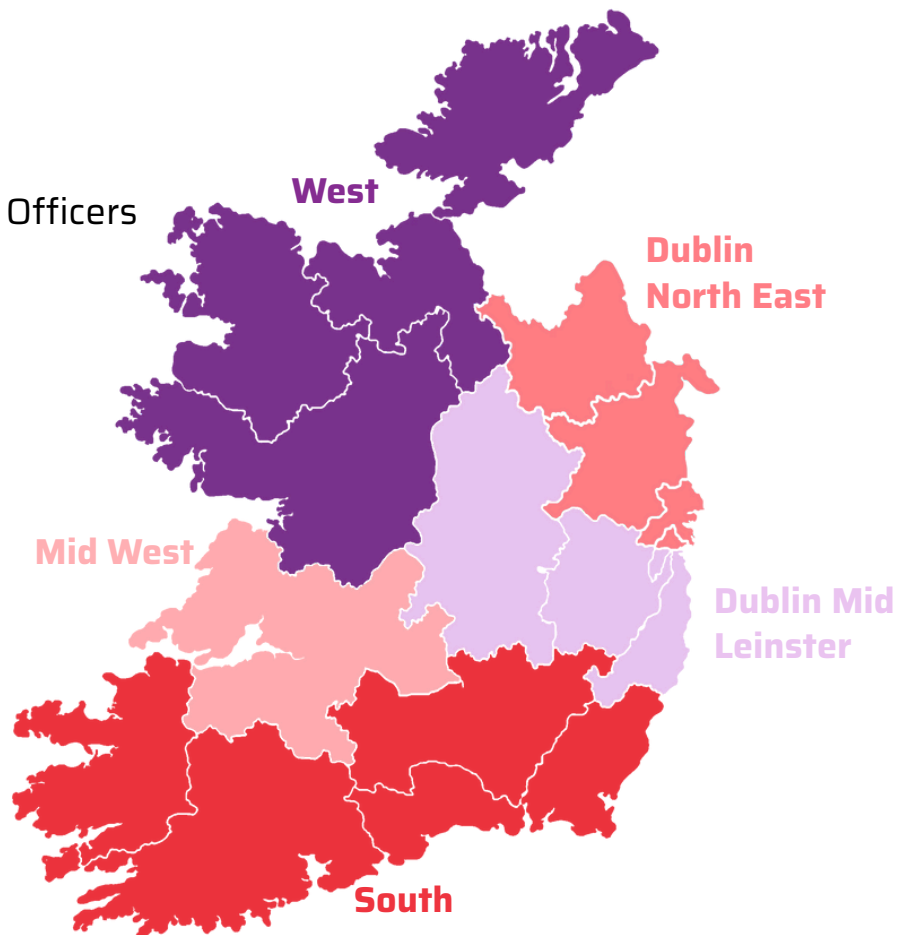


National Advocacy Service Snapshot



Geographical Spread by caseload

- Dublin North-East**
39% | 2 Advocacy Officers
- Dublin Mid-Leinster**
23% | 2 Advocacy Officers
- South**
24% | 1 FT & 2 PT Advocacy Officers
- West**
8% | 1 Advocacy Officers
- Mid West**
6% | 1 Advocacy Officers



Report Introduction

EPIC's National Advocacy Service exists to enable children in care and young people with care experience to have their views and concerns heard and taken seriously. It works to empower them to speak for themselves, resolve issues and challenges they experience, and to help them obtain the supports and services they require during their childhood and transition to adulthood.

In 2023, nine Advocacy Officers and two Advocacy Service Managers worked with 581 children and young people to provide direct one-to-one professional support across Ireland. 267 of those children and young people engaged with EPIC for the first time in 2023.

The type of advocacy provided was multifaceted, from providing crucial information to helping children and young people to know and understand their rights, to offering practical support by collaborating with other professionals to achieve the best outcomes. In more involved cases, EPIC Advocacy Officers attended Child in Care Reviews or court proceedings.

The caseload in 2023 saw the highest numbers since EPIC was established - 869 cases. In the context of the existing challenges in the alternative care system and in wider society, EPIC has seen demand for our National Advocacy Service increase by 33% over the last five years. EPIC's National Advocacy Service often operates at the coalface of the crisis in alternative care. It witnesses the real-life impact of challenges including insufficient numbers of appropriate placements, changes in social work departments, insufficient social worker numbers and lengthy waiting times for legal proceedings and state services.

EPIC's Advocacy Service also works with children and young people to resolve issues in their lives that result from wider social challenges, such as the housing and cost of living crises and the ongoing global displacement crisis. Not only has the number of cases in the Advocacy Service increased, but also the complexity, with a 20% rise in cases that take more than six months to resolve. Many of these cases are often impacted by the ongoing shortages of social workers during 2023, which contributes to delays in resolving cases.

The main presenting issues for children in care who used the Advocacy Service during this period primarily involved access to therapeutic services, requests for changes to their current care placement and support in aftercare planning. For care-experienced young people (18+), there was a significant number of cases relating to accommodation and homelessness as well as accessing legal support.

Residential care continues to be the most common care placement from where EPIC receives case referrals (55%), which reflects the level of awareness of EPIC's Advocacy Service amongst the residential care staff teams. This can be attributed to the rolling information sessions EPIC provides directly to children in these settings. Since 2017, residential care has consistently been the primary living situation of the children and young people EPIC works with, followed by general foster care (26%) and relative foster care (6%).

For young people with care experience, the largest cohort represented in the Advocacy Service were those currently residing in independent living settings (21%). Disappointingly, this was closely followed by homelessness (20%), meaning that one in five of the young adults EPIC worked with in 2023 presented to EPIC as homeless. Another interesting feature in this dataset is that 16% of young people were residing in what was previously their care placement.

EPIC also saw a marked increase in separated children seeking international protection using its service, as well as young people who have left care with their international protection application pending. 33 children and young people from this cohort sought an advocacy service from EPIC in 2023. Their unique circumstances often require navigating a distinct and complex array of issues specific to their migration status.

One in eight of the children and young people EPIC worked with in 2023 had an assessed additional need. It is worth noting that this increases from one in eleven for children under 18, to one in six for young people aged 18+, which may suggest that additional needs are not being identified or assessed until adulthood for many. It is also possible that these findings underestimate the actual prevalence of additional needs amongst children and young people who engaged with EPIC, as assessments can be delayed.

Around one in three (31%) of the children and young people we worked with in 2023 were from ethnic minorities i.e. recorded their ethnicity as something other than White Irish. Compared to the overall population, where 18% are from non-White Irish ethnicities (2022 Census), this may reflect that ethnic minorities have a higher representation in the Irish care system.

The data presented in this report, along with previous annual Advocacy Service Reports, plays a pivotal role in shaping the development of EPIC's programmes and policies. It enables the organisation to identify and monitor ongoing and emerging trends, as well as the daily challenges faced by the community of children and young individuals who seek assistance from us.



Community Demographics



38

Under 12



240

12-17yrs



303

18yrs+*

304 ♀

Female

266 ♂

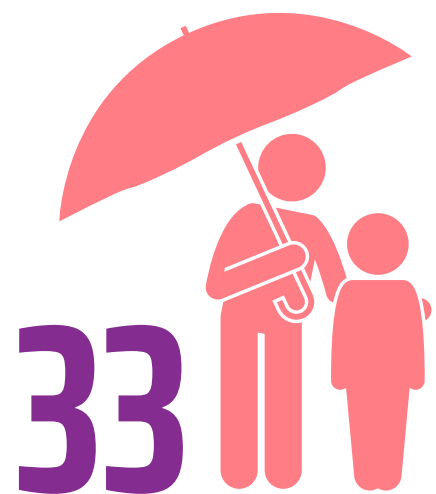
Male

11 ⚧

Trans/
non-binary



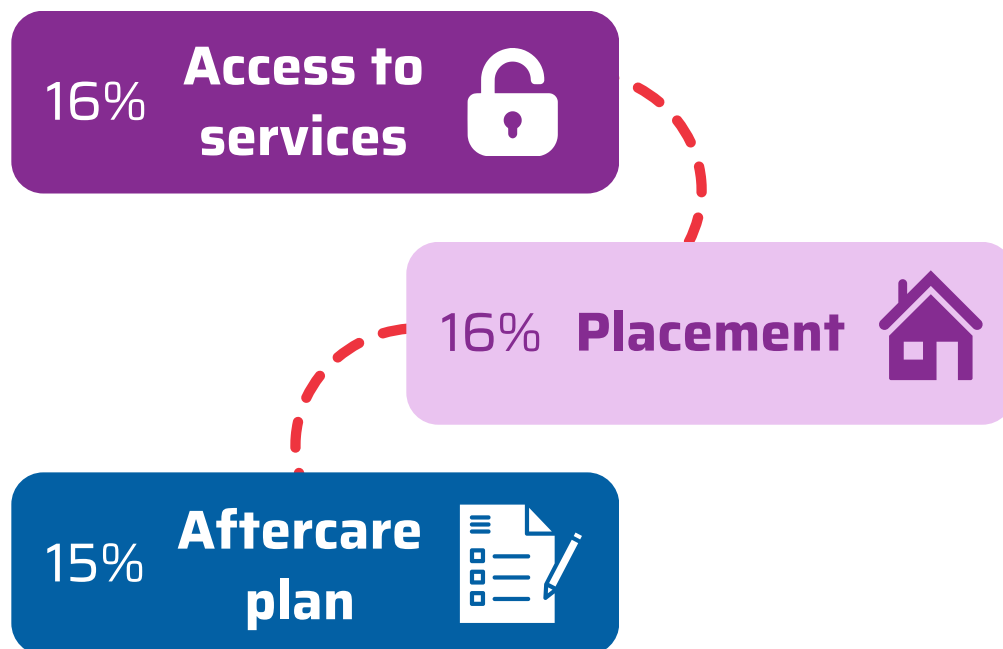
individual children and young
people assessed as having an
additional need



separated children and young
people seeking international
protection sought support

*Note on the ages: The figures are based on the age of an individual at the end of 2023.

Main Presenting Issues



For children and young people under 18



For young people over 18

Main Presenting Issues

Analysis: Children

This analysis focuses on the main three presenting issues for children under the age of 18: access to services, care placements and aftercare plans.

Access to Services



In 2023, 'Access to Services' was the primary presenting issue for children we worked with and accounted for one in eight of EPIC's cases with under 18s. These cases often involve supporting a minor to identify and access supports, which encompass therapeutic or health services.

Advocacy Service staff have noted a distinct increase in these types of cases, which have risen by 77% since 2021, highlighting pressures in the provision of care for children and for young people leaving care and transitioning to adult services.

A common feature of these cases in 2023 was the lack of an allocated social worker, who often play a crucial role in ensuring children can access services appropriate to their needs as part of their care plan. Therefore, in their absence, children may seek advocacy support to make representations to Tusla in this regard.

This category has three distinctive areas of services that children have sought an advocacy service for in the period under review - disability services, mental health services, and general or specialist health needs. EPIC's Advocacy Service has noted issues in some cases whereby a child or young person is caught in limbo between agencies, primarily between Tusla and the Health Service Executive (HSE), making it difficult to access services as a result.



Case Study: Grace

Main Presenting Issue: Access to Services



Background

Grace* was approaching her 18th birthday and living in a residential care home when she contacted EPIC. She was awaiting a decision on her international protection application and therefore, had no clear plan for when she turned 18. Grace was still waiting for a decision from the International Protection Office (IPO) when she turned 18, so she was moved on to an International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) centre. Without positive recognition of her protection status, she could not avail of a full aftercare service, and although she was eligible for the weekly IPAS allowance, her payment had not come through. Grace found life hard in the IPAS centre and was struggling financially, even with basic costs to attend school.



Key Actions taken by Grace's Advocacy Officer

Grace's Advocacy Officer assisted her to make applications for emergency funding from Tusla and her local social welfare office. Knowing these applications can take time to process, with Grace's consent, the Advocacy Officer applied for financial support for Grace through EPIC's Education and Emergency Funds. These small grants supported Grace to travel to school each day and have lunch as she was missing her meal at the IPAS centre.

Due to the communal living situation at the IPAS centre, it was difficult to find quiet space for study and rest. Through the Fund, Grace received a laptop and noise cancelling headphones so she could study at the library after school and read in the evenings when she got back to her accommodation centre. The grants also allowed for personal care needs while she waited to receive her IPAS allowance.

Case Study: Grace

Main Presenting Issue: Access to Services



Key Actions taken by Grace's Advocacy Officer

The Advocacy Officer then supported Grace in writing a letter to her solicitor to express the urgency in getting a decision from the IPO. In the letter, Grace outlined the impact of not having a decision - from struggling to attend school, and her new living environment, to the uncertainty of not knowing if she would receive aftercare and be able to move onto college.



Outcome

Shortly after, Grace received international protection status and as a result, she was eligible for the aftercare allowance and additional aftercare supports. The Advocacy Officer continued to work with Grace to apply for housing, but due to high rents, she still lives in the IPAS centre. Grace is still attending school and has started a part-time job.



Care Placement



The ongoing placement crisis in the Irish care system was very evident in EPIC's Advocacy Service caseload in 2023. The lack of appropriate placements across all settings has resulted in some children being placed in homes that do not meet their needs and who contact EPIC for advice and support. A majority of these cases (57%) were in residential care at the time of contacting EPIC. The main features of these cases often involved the child wishing to move to foster care in a context of diminishing numbers of foster care placements.

Another type of case typical for children in residential care is where the child is looking to assert their need to socialise and gain meaningful independence in their placement as they mature. Adapting to the rules and regulations of a new residential care provider can be difficult when children are moved between services. In these situations, EPIC Advocacy Officers are often needed to support the child's negotiation with the professionals responsible for their care, balancing this support with the care provider's duty of care.

In 2023, we also saw a number of cases where children were in special care, youth detention or special emergency arrangements and had no follow-on placement. These cases resulted in undue uncertainty and worry for the children involved.

Aftercare Plan



Under the Child Care Act, 1991, Tusla should engage with an eligible person when they turn sixteen years of age or from when they become eligible. If assessed as eligible for aftercare, a fully prepared aftercare plan should be completed six months prior to their turning 18 years of age.

However, EPIC have noted that due to an insufficient number of aftercare workers, the statutory timeline regarding these plans is not always met. This is reflected in the Tusla statistics from Q4 2023 indicating that 16% of young people had turned 18 with no aftercare plan, and only 43% of those under 18 had a plan.

Main Presenting Issues Under 18s

The main issues that the Advocacy Service dealt with in this category of the caseload was the delay in aftercare planning, which accounted for 25% of these cases. A further 25% of cases were in relation to the young person requesting further support to assist them to have input into their aftercare planning.

EPIC's Advocacy Service also noted that there were some young people with particular needs which were not being met in their plan. For example, 10% of these cases related to separated children aging out of care while their international protection status remained pending. This meant they were at risk of not receiving an aftercare package and being placed in an IPAS centre. A further 8% of cases related to the child's access to disability services as they as they transitioned from the care system.

Other issues in this category included young people seeking reviews of their aftercare eligibility, contact or allocation issues with aftercare workers, and seeking to transfer their aftercare support to a new service area.



Case Study: Jack

Main Presenting Issue: Placement



Background

Jack contacted EPIC when he was moving foster placement. Jack was upset because his sister, Emily, was being moved to a different placement in a different town. Jack said that he had believed his sister would be living with him.



Key Actions taken by Jack's Advocacy Officer

The Advocacy Officer met with Jack and assisted him to draft a letter to his social work team explaining that he was upset that his sister would not be living with him. In the letter, a meeting with the team to discuss Jack's concerns was requested. The team agreed to meet Jack to discuss his concerns and answer his questions about his sister's placement. The Advocacy Officer met with Jack in advance of this meeting to help him to prepare. They also emailed the social work team information about what issues and information Jack would like addressed during the meeting. Jack wanted to focus on the decision-making process about his sibling's placement, how these decisions were communicated to him, and the impact this had.

The Advocacy Officer attended the meeting with Jack, the social work team and Jack's foster carer. Jack was able to express his feelings of sadness and concern about the situation. At the meeting, Jack asked the questions he had prepared, and it was explained that all placement options were considered before making the decision. He was also assured that his sister Izzy was involved in the decision about where she would live.



Outcome

Jack did not get the outcome he had hoped for which was that he and his sister would live together, but he was assured that he would continue to see his sister regularly. Jack had all his questions answered in relation to his sister's placement, and the meeting addressed his concerns about the move and gave him the space to ask if his care placement was considered for his sibling, and why this could not go ahead.

Case Study: Johnny

Main Presenting Issue: Aftercare Plan



Background

Johnny was in care for a number of years. His residential care home made a referral to EPIC on his behalf as he could not return to his family home when he turned 18. Johnny needed clarity on his aftercare plan and where he would move to when he turned 18.



Key Actions taken by Johnny's Advocacy Officer

Johnny's Advocacy Officer agreed a day and time to meet with Johnny to discuss his concerns and his aftercare plan. During the meeting, he informed his Advocacy Officer that he was turning 18 in five months and did not know where he was going to live. He wanted to know where he would be moving to so he could prepare for moving on from residential care.

Johnny gave his consent for the Advocacy Officer to discuss the issue with his aftercare worker and social worker. Due to the limited number of aftercare placements in the area, they could not guarantee that a placement would be available for Johnny on his 18th birthday.

Johnny had several aftercare planning meetings in the run up to his birthday but no updates on whether he would have accommodation to move onto or not. Three weeks before his 18th birthday, Johnny consented to his Advocacy Officer escalating the matter to EPIC's Advocacy Service Manager for the region, and the relevant senior professionals. The urgency of Johnny's situation was recognised, and funding was eventually secured for accommodation 11 days before Johnny turned 18.



Outcome

Johnny was able to transition into an aftercare placement when he turned 18. He was happy about this and settled into his new aftercare accommodation well. Johnny gained confidence from the experience of advocacy support and continued to avail of EPIC's Advocacy Service when needed.

Main Presenting Issues

Analysis: Young People

This analysis focuses on the main three presenting issues for young people aged 18 - 26: accommodation; legal support; and homelessness.

Accommodation



Accommodation remains a significant presenting issue to EPIC's Advocacy Service accounting for 11% of cases overall in 2023, remaining consistent with 2022 where it was 12%. This reflects the ongoing housing crisis and the persistent issues young people with a care background face in relation to finding and securing suitable accommodation.

It is noteworthy in 2023's caseload that the majority of young people (59%) seeking an advocacy service regarding their accommodation were aged twenty-one or younger. This highlights that despite aftercare support, young people can still struggle to identify and access housing support.

Another consistent feature in the 2023 caseload is young people seeking advice regarding private tenancy issues, where young people requested advocacy to assist them with meetings and to help them understand their housing agreement and what is required to sustain it. This included collaboration with aftercare services and engagement with other agencies, such as Threshold. Some cases also involved young people seeking an advocacy service in relation to tenancy issues, such as the receipt of notice to quit. EPIC have noted an increased reluctance amongst young people to assert their tenancy rights in the private rental sector, reflecting feelings of precarity in the ongoing housing crisis.



Case Study: Laura

Main Presenting Issue: Accommodation



Background

Laura was nineteen and living in temporary transitional accommodation provided by her local County Council. She was subjected to domestic violence and coercive control by her partner and had secured a protection order against him. Laura was fearful of her ex-partner and was unable to deny him entry to her property, which was in breach of the conditions of her tenancy.

Having received an advocacy service from EPIC in the past, Laura reached out to EPIC for support as she was facing eviction. If evicted, Laura would not be able to access County Council or emergency homeless services for a period of 12 months, as per its policy.



Key Actions taken by Laura's Advocacy Officer

With Laura's permission, the Advocacy Officer spoke to the local Housing Officer and arranged a meeting to discuss Laura's tenancy agreement. In the meeting, the Advocacy Officer made the case for an extension for Laura and discussed her right to appeal any decision made. They also asked for the 12-month period to be reduced to 3 months given Laura's vulnerabilities.

The Advocacy Officer contacted Threshold on Laura's behalf and advised her on the steps she needed to take in order to self-advocate.

The Advocacy Officer supported Laura to feel confident attending meetings with the County Council and worked with Laura after meetings to debrief and explain any decisions made.

The Advocacy Officer contacted Laura's aftercare team to inquire about support for accommodation. The aftercare worker agreed to help Laura and made a referral to Focus Ireland on her behalf.

Case Study: Laura

Main Presenting Issue: Accommodation



Outcome

Laura received notice of eviction and had to leave the property. She was able to stay with a relative on a temporary basis. While the advocacy service could not prevent the County Council's final decision on her tenancy, the process gave Laura the confidence to continue engaging with the County Council to seek a resolution to her housing situation.



Legal Support



Care-experienced young people whose children were being taken into care or were already in care were consistent in seeking an advocacy service from EPIC. This type of case made up nearly half (42%) of the caseload in this category. Advocacy Service staff helped care-leaver parents understand court proceedings and court reports and provided an advocacy service as required at critical junctures during their child's time in care. The prominence of this type of case underlines the need for multi-layered services to support care-leaver parents.

A number of young people who had cases in this category were able to avail of professional legal advice from Community Law and Mediation (CLM), with whom EPIC have a multi-annual project partnership. This partnership ensures that the children and young people we advocate for have access to justice, are aware of their legal rights and have these rights upheld. In 2023, 22 young people (18+) were supported by the CLM-EPIC partnership, receiving legal advice on a range of issues including a civil action resulting from a young person's time in care, to international protection advice, and support to appeal a decision on ineligibility for aftercare.

Young people also sought legal advice on immigration status, Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) and use of deed polls.

This is the third year of the EPIC and CLM partnership which provides free monthly legal advice clinics to care-experienced children and young individuals. This partnership is supported by, and delivered in collaboration with Tusla's Office of Legal Services.



Case Study: Jenny

Main Presenting Issue: Legal



Background

Jenny felt she was neglected and harmed while in the care of Tusla as a child. She also felt that the decisions Tusla made about her care were not in her best interests. Jenny expressed a desire to take a case against Tusla and was referred to EPIC by her aftercare worker for independent advice.



Key Actions taken by Jenny's Advocacy Officer

After listening to Jenny's thoughts on the provision of care she received and her decision to take a case against Tusla, Jenny's Advocacy Officer suggested that she book an appointment for the Free Legal Advice Clinics provided by EPIC's partner, Community Law and Mediation (CLM). Jenny agreed and her Advocacy Officer made an appointment on her behalf. The Advocacy Officer attended the clinic with Jenny for support.

In the consultation with the solicitor, Jenny outlined her experience in care and her intention to take a case. The CLM solicitor explained the threshold for taking cases against State bodies and the burden of proof. She advised Jenny to apply for her care files under the FOI Act and to look at the information on file. The solicitor recommended that Jenny utilise the EPIC Advocacy Service to apply for the files, and to come back for a follow up consultation once she had received them.

The solicitor explained that Jenny can seek legal aid if she decided to move forward with the case against Tusla.



Outcome

Jenny decided to apply for her care files as advised. She was happy with the advice and decided to take the recommended steps before deciding whether to progress the matter. Her Advocacy Officer supported her to make the FOI request, and if required, the Advocacy Officer will assist Jenny in seeking further legal advice.

Community Law & Mediation



12

Number of clinics held



35

Number of children and young people assisted

13



Number of U18 assisted

22



Number of over 18s assisted



43

Number of legal issues

Main Presenting Issues

Child Care Law

Civil Complaints

Aftercare

Domestic Violence



Community
Law & Mediation

Homelessness



In the 2022 National Advocacy Service Report, EPIC noted with sadness that the number of homelessness cases in our service had doubled from the previous year. It is with greater disappointment that we noted a further 10% increase on this figure in 2023. Of the young people that engaged with EPIC's Advocacy Service in 2023, one in five were experiencing homelessness. In the previous year, the increase could be attributed to the ending of certain COVID-19-related measures such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the eviction ban. However, in 2023, the basis of care leaver homelessness was generally due to a lack of available housing options.

Some of the reasons young people sought an Advocacy Service in relation to homelessness were due to being ineligible for aftercare support, ageing out of care with no accommodation option, or having to vacate their rented accommodation. While EPIC was successful in supporting young people to secure accommodation in these cases, it was evident that homeless charities and Approved Housing Bodies, as well as diligent aftercare workers, were playing a key role in the prevention of care-leaver homelessness.

In cases where housing could not be obtained, a number of care-experienced young people resorted to moving in with family or partners to avoid sleeping rough or in hostels. EPIC also met a number of young people who were sleeping rough at the time of referral.

For EPIC, 2023 marked a continuance of insufficient housing options for young people as they leave care.



Case Study: Joy

Main Presenting Issue: Homelessness



Background

Joy, a care-experienced mum, had sought an advocacy service from EPIC during a period of assessment with her first-born child. When the assessment process was due to end, there wasn't any step-down accommodation options for Joy and her child. Joy was concerned for her own welfare and safety, as well as that of her baby, as it was likely that they would have to transition into emergency homelessness accommodation.



Key Actions taken by Joy's Advocacy Officer

Joy's Advocacy Officer explained to her that there was likely to be no immediate solution for her due to the ongoing housing crisis. The Advocacy Officer agreed that they would collaborate with all professionals and services, including Joy's aftercare worker, in highlighting Joy's vulnerability given the circumstances. The hope was to accelerate Joy's case and get her approved for long-term housing as a matter of urgency. Joy gave her consent for the Advocacy Officer to do so.

Upon completion of her assessment, Joy was moved into her first emergency accommodation placement. The Advocacy Officer supported Joy to articulate her concerns about this transition to the relevant County Council housing team and social work department. Shortly after, Joy was moved to a different emergency accommodation placement at very short notice.

On several occasions during Joy's time in the second emergency placement, she communicated to her Advocacy Officer that she felt hopeless and that she was going to leave because nothing was going to change. Joy's Advocacy Officer acknowledged her concerns and spoke to her in detail about what the implications for taking such a decision would be - including that if she disengaged with homeless services, her baby would be taken into care.

Case Study: Joy

Main Presenting Issue: Homelessness



Key Actions taken by Joy's Advocacy Officer

The Advocacy Officer also highlighted that even though the process was taking longer than Joy would like, it was a matter of 'when' and not 'if' a decision would be taken. In time, housing would be provided for her and her child.

Joy asked her Advocacy Officer to attend meetings related to her accommodation with her until it was resolved. Joy exercised the option of accessing this support from her Advocacy Officer when she felt it was necessary.

The Advocacy Officer wrote a letter outlining Joy's precarious circumstances to support the discussions Joy's aftercare worker was having with the local Council on Joy's behalf. The letter detailed Joy's vulnerability and level of need due to her circumstances.



Outcome

Joy decided to stay in her emergency accommodation and did so for a significant time. Eventually, she was offered suitable accommodation by the local Council, through an approved housing body. Joy still lives in this accommodation and continues to work with her Advocacy Officer on other advocacy issues.



National Advocacy Service Snapshot



305

meetings with children/ young
people and professionals

149

meetings with professionals

77

Court
hearings
attended



40

on-site information
and visiting
advocacy service

140

info sessions
about EPIC

Conclusion

The 2023 analysis of EPIC's National Advocacy Service highlights significant challenges faced by children in care and care-leavers. The year saw an unprecedented number of cases, reflecting rising demand in EPIC's services and an increasing complexity of issues addressed.

Access to services remains as a major challenge. Barriers in obtaining therapeutic, health, and disability services were common, often due to insufficient interagency cooperation and lack of allocated social workers, highlighting the ongoing need for urgent action in these areas in 2024.

The crisis in children's care placements was prominent in EPIC's 2023 caseload. There were clear pressures on the system resulting in cases where children were not being provided with appropriate placements suitable to their needs.

A critical issue this year was the persistent housing crisis. Many young people experienced homelessness or struggled to find suitable accommodation. This shows the fragility of the state's statutory obligations in ensuring children and young people, for whom they are acting in loco parentis, are protected from the impact of broader social issues. Additionally, aftercare planning and eligibility remained problematic, with delays and insufficient support often leaving young people fraught with uncertainty and unprepared for adulthood.

The high representation of children and young people of ethnic minority backgrounds, or with a diagnosed additional need, as well as increased numbers of separated children seeking international protection have underscored the heterogeneous nature of children in care and care leavers. This further demonstrates the agile nature of independent advocacy and the need for tailored and targeted supports for seldom-heard groups in care.

Reflecting on 2023, the multifaceted role played by our Advocacy Service has been essential in addressing the complex needs of children in care and care-leavers. The data presented in this report not only informs our ongoing efforts but also shapes the development of EPIC's programmes and policies.

Conclusion

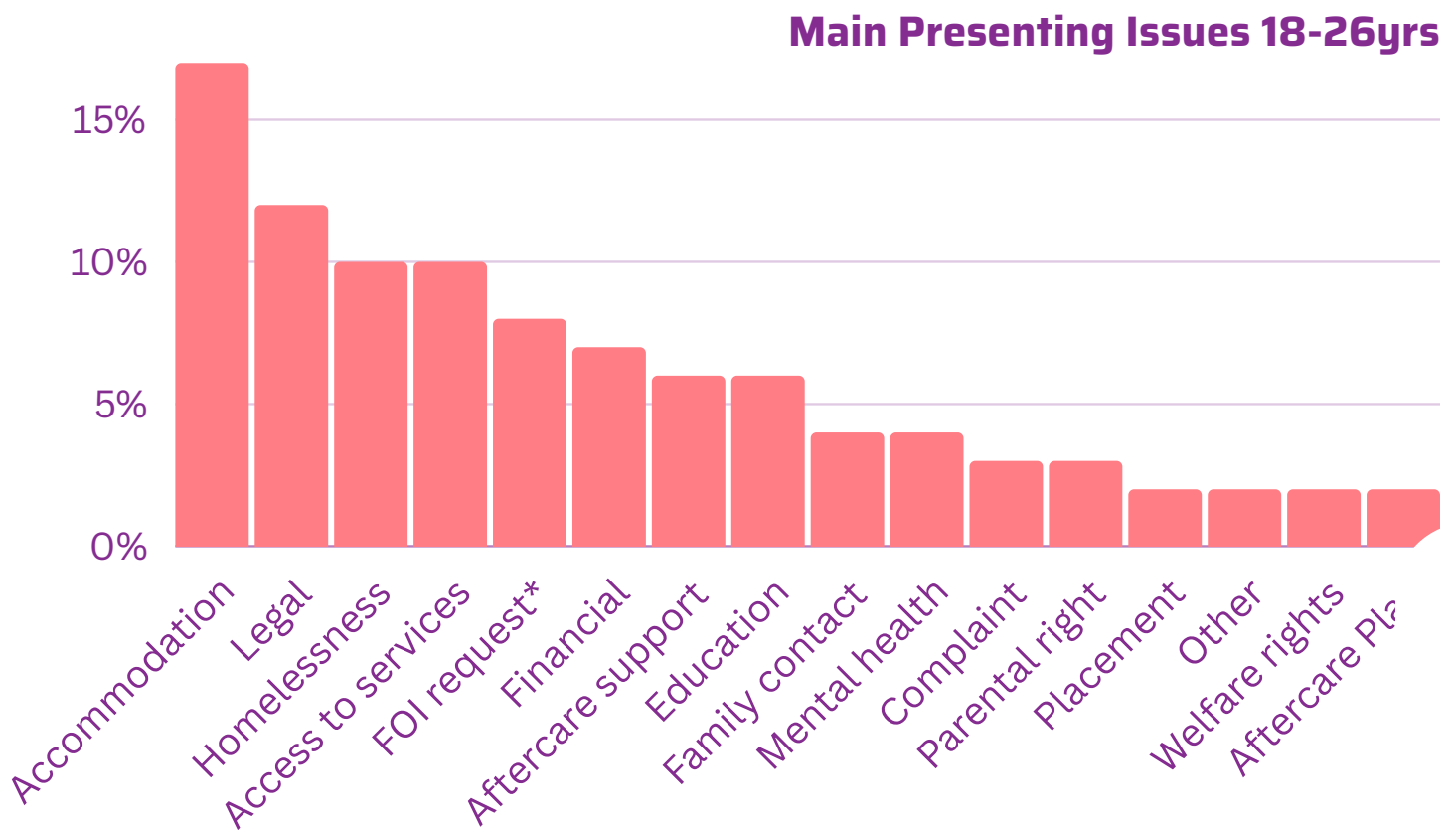
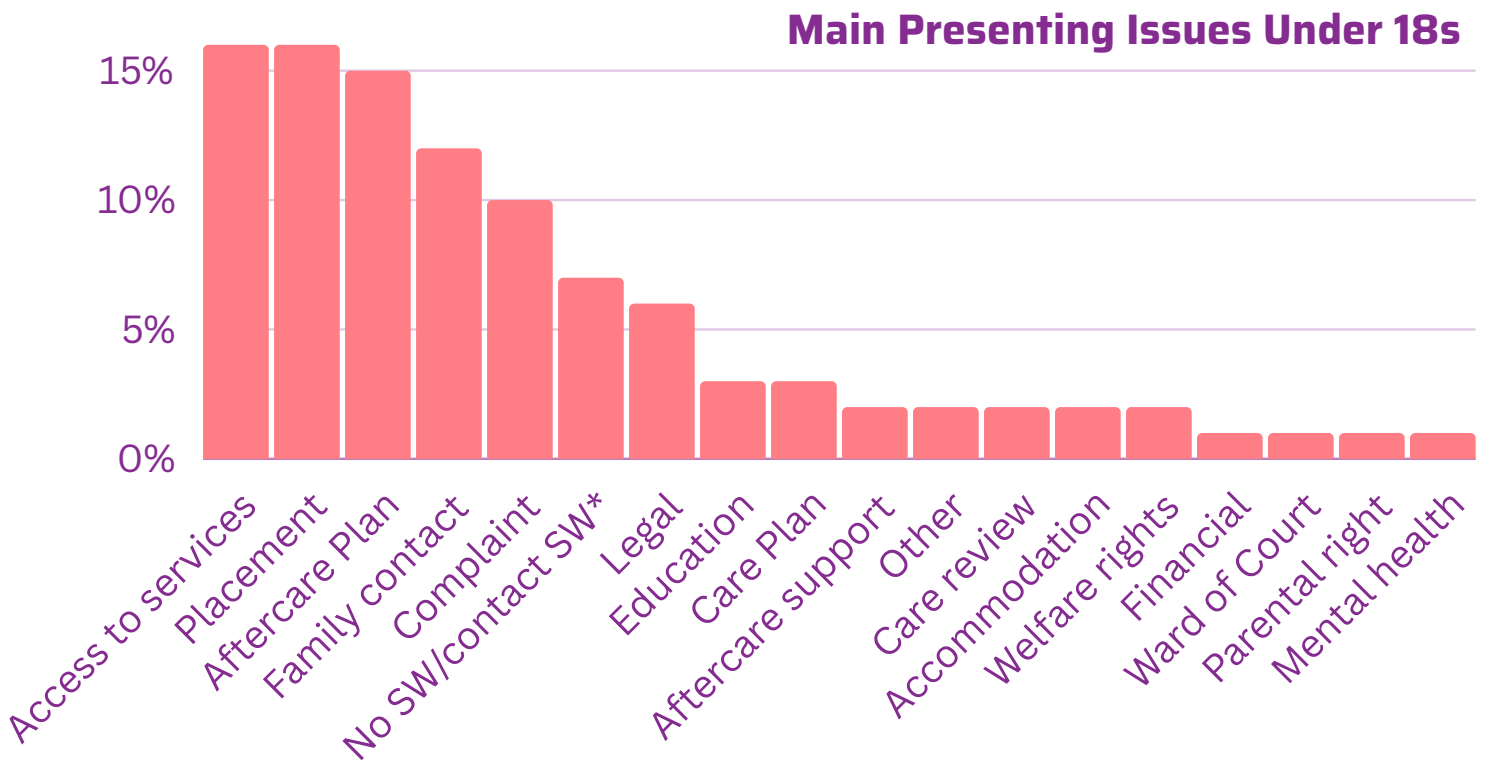
By identifying emerging trends and addressing ongoing issues, we strive for better outcomes and support for those we serve.

We are deeply grateful for the trust placed in EPIC by the children and young people we worked with in 2023. Their experiences, challenges, and resilience inspire our work. We also extend our heartfelt appreciation to our colleagues and partner organisations across the sector. Their professionalism, collaboration, and dedication have been instrumental in supporting children and young people through substantial adversity.

In conclusion, we remain committed to advocating for the rights and needs of children in care and care-leavers, ensuring their voices are heard and responded to, and that they receive the supports and services to which they are entitled. We look forward to continuing our positive partnerships and making meaningful progress in the years ahead. The ongoing collaboration with professionals and services is vital, and we are optimistic that together we can create a more supportive and responsive care system for all.



Main Presenting Issues



EPIC categorise advocacy cases by the main presenting issue, reflecting what children or young people needed an Advocate's help with the most. To streamline data analysis, we focus on the 'Main Presenting Issue,' with additional issues possibly requiring separate advocacy cases. *No Social Worker/Contact Social Worker; Freedom of Information Request

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