

National Advocacy Service Report 2022: Text Only

EPIC, Empowering People in Care

- info@epiconline.ie
- www.epiconline.ie
- Mon- Fri 9am-5pm
- 01 872 766

Our Offices

- EPIC Dublin, 7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7, Co. Dublin D07 KX52
- EPIC Cork, Millerd Hall, Millerd Street, Co. Cork T12W8CW
- EPIC Limerick, Northside Youth Space, Ballynanty Rd, Ballynanty, Co. Limerick V94 TPP3
- EPIC Mayo, Castlebar Social Services, Castle Street Car Park, Gorteendrunagh, Castlebar, Co. Mayo F23 CY67

At the end of 2022, there were 5,759 children in the care of the state in Ireland, and 2,949 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.

Article 12

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.

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Strategic Goals

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

Vision, Values and Mission

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 would like to 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 2022. We would also like to thank the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for their collaboration and engagement. Community Law and Mediation (CLM) deserve a special mention for our project partnership which provided free legal advice clinics to children and young people with care experience throughout 2022. This pilot project was made possible by funding from RTÉ Does Comic Relief which was administered by the Community Foundation of Ireland.

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 2022, whose experiences and challenges are documented throughout this report.

Report Introduction

EPIC's National Advocacy Service works to empower children in care and young people with care experience to have a say and be heard on issues that affect their lives. This report offers an overview of the Service's activities in 2022, providing insights into the children and young people who utilised the Service and the issues it addressed. Advocates play a multifaceted role, ranging from offering essential information to care-experienced children and young people, helping them understand their rights and entitlements while in care and during transition to aftercare services, providing practical support, and collaborating with other professionals to optimise outcomes. In more involved cases, EPIC Advocates may attend child in care reviews or conduct court accompaniment with children or young people.

Throughout 2022, a dedicated team of nine EPIC Advocates, with the support of two Advocacy Managers, worked across Ireland, assisting 564 children and young people on a total of 848 advocacy cases. This marks EPIC's fourteenth Advocacy Service Report.

In 2022, the caseload for the Advocacy Service returned to pre-pandemic levels, rebounding from a dip in 2020 when the caseload dropped from 853 to 777, the first decline in over a decade. This can be attributed to the impact of lockdowns, reduced services, limited face-to-face interactions, and disrupted information sessions and meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the five-year period from 2018 to 2022, there has been a 30% increase in advocacy cases, highlighting the growing demand for EPIC's Advocacy Service. Moreover, there was a 17% rise in new referrals to the Advocacy Service in 2022 compared to the previous year, with the number increasing from 349 cases in 2021 to 409 new cases in 2022.

As Ireland emerged from COVID-19, the return to normalcy meant that care-experienced children and young people were eager to see immediate action on activities and issues that had been curtailed by the pandemic. For instance, some eagerly anticipated the resumption of family visits or sought new placements. Many referred themselves to EPIC to assist them in navigating the changing environment and to help resolve some of the challenges they were encountering.

Some of these challenges were exacerbated by the growing shortage of statutory social workers in Ireland in 2022. Consequently, the duration of advocacy cases, which were dependent on engagement with an allocated social worker to resolve, were prolonged.

Regarding case duration in 2022, only 16% of cases were resolved in less than one month, and fewer than 4% were closed within a week.

In 2022, the highest cohort of children and young people came from residential care, reflecting 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 care in these settings. Residential care has consistently been the primary living situation of the children and young people EPIC works with since 2017. This was followed by general foster care, independent living, homelessness and at home (with family).

The highest proportion of advocacy need in this dataset was those living in supported accommodation, who required support for, on average, 4.2 cases per individual. This could highlight the need for advocacy to advise and support young people particularly as they transition to adulthood and independent living at 18 years of age and often without a conventional support network that their peers have.

Largely, the spread of care placement or living circumstances across our caseload remained similar to 2021 indicating no notable change in living or placement options for children in care or young people with care experience.

In contrast, there has been a promising increase in young people living in aftercare placements, from 2 young people in 2021 to 31 in 2022. The uptick in usage of the CAS (Capital Assistance Scheme) for Care Leavers scheme by certain local authorities during this period may have contributed to this increase.

2022 also saw the start of the war in Ukraine as well as an ongoing global displacement crisis, which saw a significant increase in people coming to Ireland seeking international protection. This included many separated children and unaccompanied minors, who come into state care and therefore, may refer to EPIC for advocacy support. Their unique circumstances require our Advocates to often navigate a distinct, complex array of issues specific to their migration status.

1 in 10 of the children and young people EPIC worked with in 2022 had an assessed additional need. The type of needs varied widely, and in some cases, children and young people had been diagnosed with more than one need. It is possible that these findings underestimate the actual prevalence of additional needs amongst children and young people who engaged with EPIC. It may not always have been disclosed or apparent, particularly in relation to mild learning difficulties. In some cases, it is also likely that a child or young person had not been assessed.

The data presented in this report, along with previous 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.

National Advocacy Service Snapshot

- Advocates supported 564 children and young people.
- Advocates worked on 848 advocacy cases.
- Main presenting issues: accommodation, care placement, access to services, legal query.
- 409 children and young people engaged with EPIC for the first time.
- 44% of new referrals to EPIC were made by children and young people.
- 652 meetings with children and young people.
- 272 meetings with children and young people and professionals.
- 203 meetings with professionals.

- 118 info sessions about EPIC.
- 40 freedom of information request meetings.
- 53 court attendances.
- 2 Advocacy Service Managers
- 7 full-time Advocates
- 2 part-time Advocates
- Geographical spread by case load
 - Dublin North-East: 41% of cases, 2 Advocates
 - Dublin Mid-Leinster: 23% of cases, 2 Advocates
 - South: 20% of cases, 1 full-time and 2 part-time Advocates
 - West: 10%, 1 Advocate
 - Mid-West: 6%, 1 Advocate

Advocacy Cases 2018-2022

- 2018: 653 cases
- 2019: 843 cases
- 2020: 853 cases
- 2021: 777 cases
- 2022: 848 cases

Community Demographics

- Gender Identity
 - 303 female, 252 male and 9 trans or non-binary
- Age
 - 46 under 12, 207 12-17 years and 495 18 years+
- Diagnosed Additional Need
 - 59 individual children and young people assessed as having an additional need.

Duration of Advocacy Cases

- 1 week or less: 4%
- 1 week to 1 month: 12%
- 3 months to 5 months: 49%
- 6 months to 12 months: 19%
- 1 year+: 16%

Main Presenting Issues:

- Accommodation: 12%
 - Access to services: 10%
 - Care placement: 10%
 - Legal: 8%
 - Family contact: 8%
 - Complaint: 7%
 - Education: 6%
 - Aftercare plan: 6%
 - Homelessness: 6%
 - Financial: 5%
 - Aftercare support: 5%
 - Access to files: 4%
 - Parental right: 3%
 - Mental health: 2%
 - No social worker/contact: 2%
 - Other: 2%
 - Welfare rights: 1%
 - Care review: 1%
 - Care plan: 1%
 - Ward of court: 1%
 - Drug/alcohol use: >1%
- 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.

Main Presenting Issues: Analysis

Accommodation (excluding homelessness): 12%

In 2022, accommodation remained the main presenting issue, similar to 2020 and 2021. This reflects the escalating housing crisis in Ireland and demonstrates the increasing difficulties that young people with a care background face in relation to finding and securing suitable accommodation. This issue is

particularly prevalent in the Dublin Mid Leinster and Dublin North East regions, making up 75% of all accommodation-related cases.

Throughout 2022, young people requested advocacy to assist them with meetings and to work with them to ensure they understood their housing agreement and what was required to sustain it. This also included collaborating with aftercare services and linking with other agencies, such as Threshold or requesting Advocates to support tenancy issues such as notices to quit. Cases relating to accommodation can often be complex, and these cases tend to be lengthy, with the average case duration lasting 185 days in 2022.

While accommodation issues continued to be the primary presenting issue in the National Advocacy Service, there was an 18% reduction in such cases compared to the previous year - from 121 cases in 2021 to 99 in 2022. In isolation, this could be viewed as positive. However, the decrease in overall accommodation related cases is tempered by a substantial increase in the number of cases relating to homelessness. Advocates have further noted an increasing reluctance amongst young people in asserting their tenancy rights in the private rental sector reflecting feelings of precarity in the ongoing housing crisis.

Access to Services: 10%

The number of individuals seeking direct advocacy support in relation to access to services has risen by 45%, revealing a pressure on the ability of children and young people to receive critical interventions. Advocates noted that many of the issues that EPIC deals with are in relation to accessing disability services for children in care or transitioning to aftercare and adult services. These issues can arise in some cases whereby a child or young person is caught in limbo between agencies such as Tusla and the HSE (Health Service Executive), making it difficult to access services as a result.

The services accessed by children with the support of an Advocate primarily related to disability, mental health, and other health services. Regarding care-experienced young adults, the primary services accessed with the support of an Advocate related to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

There was also an increase in the number of cases which involved linking care-leaver parents with community services, including creches and Family Support Services.

Care Placement: 10%

The nature of care placement issues for which children sought advocacy in 2022 was often due to the diminishing number of available placements within the care system at a time of unprecedented

crisis. The number of children in residential care who sought advocacy to enable them to communicate their desire to move to a foster care placement rose. This trend occurred against a backdrop of a diminishing number of foster carers in this period, which has had a significant impact on children who wish to live in a stable family home.

Advocacy cases amongst children in residential care can sometimes also occur due to the natural desire amongst children for more independence as they mature. Children can find it challenging while in residential care to adapt to the rules of the care home, especially if they have been moved amongst different care providers with varying rules and practices.

Advocacy cases relating to care placements decreased by 21% when compared to 2021. While the overall number of cases we received in this area decreased, there was an increase in children who had no placement or wished to move to foster care to from residential care reflecting the pressures in identifying available placements this year.

Legal Support: 8%

In 2022, a significant trend was observed whereby advocacy was sought by care-leaver parents whose children were being taken into care or were already in care. These cases required multiple levels of support for the care-leaver, including information on the care process, and assistance before, during and after court hearings. These cases often necessitated the Advocacy Service working alongside legal professionals, social workers, guardians ad litem (GAL's) and any other individuals who may be involved in the proceedings. Advocates have supported care-leaver parents to understand court proceedings and court reports, and often worked with these young people throughout the duration of the care arrangement of the child.

Another significant trend in 2022 was the provision of advocacy services to children who were seeking international protection as unaccompanied minors, or who had come to Ireland under the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC). EPIC also worked with young people who had sought international protection as children and who were moved to the International Protection Accommodation Service (direct provision) upon turning eighteen while awaiting a decision on their asylum application, as well as with young people in relation to citizenship and other immigration issues. The majority of these children and young people were from Nigeria, Syria, Somalia, Ukraine, and Romania. The lack of legislative clarity regarding separated children and unaccompanied minors,

both as a child seeking international protection and in care of the state resulted in particularly complex cases.

The need for legal support has remained consistent over the years, with 69 cases in 2020, 67 cases in 2021 and 72 cases in 2022. The consistency of children and young people's need for legal support and advice highlights the importance for Advocates to be able to refer cases to legal professionals when required. 2022 marked the second year of partnership between EPIC and Community Law and Mediation (CLM). This partnership ensures that care-experienced children and young people have access to justice, are aware of their rights and have these rights upheld through the provision of free, independent legal advice and wrap around advocacy services. In 2022, CLM held 12 monthly clinics, supporting 33 children and young people across 41 legal issues.

Family Access: 8%

Family access is consistently prominent in the presenting issues to EPIC's Advocacy Service. There were 65 cases relating to family access in 2022, compared to 75 in 2020 and 67 in 2021. The slight decrease in this three-year period could reflect Ireland's emergence from COVID-19 lockdowns, creating less complicated access arrangements.

In 2022, these cases can be divided into two main categories:

Child-Parent Access: The first issue is related to access for children in care who may not have regular contact with their birth parents. This can occur for a range of reasons, including birth parents experiencing ongoing issues such as addiction and mental health challenges which impact on their ability to maintain regular visits. As EPIC supports care-leavers up to the age of 26, advocacy services are often sought by care-experienced mothers who have children in care and require advocacy in relation to access with their children. This type of advocacy accounts for 30% of cases, while the remaining 70% of cases in this area are sought by children.

Sibling Access: The second issue is related to sibling access, where advocacy support is sought by children to help them secure visits with siblings who are in different placements, or by care-leavers with siblings still in care. Further complexities arise when there is considerable distance between placements, when there are siblings in different care settings or living in different counties, or when there are placement breakdowns for one or more siblings.

Although the numbers were stable around this issue, the difficulties around organising continuous family access are deepening with the average duration of cases increasing by approximately ten days

per case. Advocates noted that cases were often impacted by insufficient social work and social care staffing.

Other Presenting Issues

Alongside the five primary presenting issues recorded, several other issues have seen a notable increase in EPIC's Advocacy Service, including homelessness and financial cases. To provide context, homelessness cases jumped from 22 cases in 2021 to 48 in 2022, an increase of 106%. Likewise, financial cases rose from 29 in 2021, to 45 in 2022, reflecting a 55% increase.

The jump in these caseloads reflects the impact on care-experienced children and young people of the current housing and cost-of-living crises.

Homelessness: 118% from 2021

Advocates worked on a total of 48 cases where homelessness was the main presenting issue, more than double the number of cases in 2021. There are several factors that may have contributed to this. When COVID-19 restrictions ended in early 2022, certain allowances that had been made during the crisis, including young people temporarily staying in care placements upon turning 18 and financial buffers such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) ended. Lastly, the ban on evictions implemented by the Government, which meant a layer of security for renters that had not existed previously, ended in March, though it was reintroduced in October 2023.

In correlation with the accommodation figures, most homeless young people —66% of the total— live in the Dublin Mid Leinster (DML) and Dublin North East (DNE) areas. Each area of DML and DNE has seen more than a twofold increase in the number of young people looking for support on homelessness from 2021 to 2022.

It is of note that the gender disaggregation remained balanced in both 2021 and 2022, with an almost 50/50 split of male/female representation. The age range also remained consistent, with most cases in both years involving individuals in the 18-21 age group, accounting for 65% of the total.

In the 17–20-year-old age group, 77% of the young people that accessed the National Advocacy Service in relation to homelessness were also receiving an aftercare service. That figure falls to 61% when 21-year-olds are included.

It should be further noted that of the 564 children and young people EPIC worked with this year, 74 were classified as homeless, accounting for 13% of the caseload. This is higher than EPIC's caseload

figures on homelessness as a presenting issue as some of the children and young using the Advocacy Service are homeless, though this is not their primary presenting issue.

Financial: 55% increase from 2022

Many of these cases involve the National Advocacy Service assisting young people to access support for general day-to-day living. This included advocacy support to assist care-leavers to access social welfare entitlements and engagement with community welfare officers. This support has been critical in resolving issues related to social welfare payments and general household needs. The 55% increase in this caseload reflects the emerging cost of living crisis in 2022 and the disproportionate effect this has on young people as they leave the care system. 82% of the cases in this category involved young people aged eighteen and over.

National Advocacy Service Snapshot

Care Status of Children and Young People

- Under 18 in voluntary care or on a care order: 44%
- Aged 18-23 receiving an aftercare service: 24%
- 18+ who have left care: 25%
- Under 18 and under Section 5 (deemed to be homeless, but not in the care of Tusla) or in detention: 4%
- Other care status: 3%

Care Placement and Living Circumstances

- Residential care: 25%
- General foster care: 19%
- Independent living: 15%
- Homeless: 14%
- At home: 5%
- Other: 5%
- Aftercare placement: 4%
- Relative foster care: 3%
- Special care unit: 2%
- Supported accommodation: 2%
- Student accommodation: 1%
- Supported lodgings: 1%

- Disability service: 1%
- Oberstown Centre: 1%
- Prison: 1%
- Don't know: >1%
- Direct Provision: >1%
- Note: Individuals who have had several cases with EPIC are recorded as living in the circumstances where they were when their most recent case was opened to allow for most up to date data.

Community Law and Mediation

This is the second year of the EPIC and Community Law & Mediation (CLM) legal advice clinic, tailored to children and young individuals within the care system. The collaborative endeavour aims to empower children in care and care-experienced young people, by ensuring they are aware of and can assert their legal rights in matters such as health, housing, education, and other areas,

In 2022, this initiative continued during the challenging backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated existing disadvantages faced by vulnerable individuals, impacting various aspects of their lives, including family visits, education, mental health supports and housing options. The clinic is generously funded by the Community Foundation for Ireland (CFI) and RTÉ Does Comic Relief and operates monthly.

- 12 clinics held
- 33 children and young people assisted
- 25 over 18 year olds assisted
- 8 under 18 year olds assisted
- 41 legal issues

Main Presenting Issues

- Domestic violence
- Guardianship and custody/access/parental rights
- Freedom of information requests
- Civil complaints
- Family law

Case Study: Community Law and Mediation

Nic

EPIC was invited to deliver an information session at a residential care home for unaccompanied minors and separated children seeking international protection. One of the young people who attended the session had arrived in Ireland from Ukraine, at which time he was placed in the care of Tusla.

Main Presenting Issues

- Initially, Nic wanted clarity on whether he was entitled to an aftercare service as he was sixteen and coming close to leaving care and felt aftercare could be an effective support to help him reach his educational goals.
- Nic also wanted advice in relation to other supports he could avail of to further his education if he was not eligible for aftercare support.
- During this case, Nic requested additional advocacy support in relation to ascertaining his legal status in Ireland. He wanted to know how to become an Irish citizen to secure his future in Ireland.

Key Actions Taken by Nic's Advocate

1. Nic's Advocate liaised with Tusla regarding his aftercare entitlements as according to the information Nic had provided, he met the criteria of the Tusla Aftercare Policy.
2. Due to the nature of Nic's case, the Advocate also suggested that Nic attend the CLM Free Legal Advice Clinic, and an appointment was made with Nic's consent.
3. In the meantime, Nic's Advocate brought this case to the attention of Tusla management. This process took time but resulted in Nic being assessed as eligible for full aftercare support, and therefore, he would be supported to further his education.
4. As the concerns Nic had around his education supports and entitlement to aftercare were resolved before Nic's appointment at the CLM Clinic, Nic decided to use his appointment to learn about Ireland's citizenship rules. Nic was in Ireland under the Temporary Protection Directive which is due to expire in March 2023. Nic was concerned that when the Directive ended, his future in Ireland could be in jeopardy.

5. Nic met with the CLM solicitor and his Advocate, where he was informed about the citizenship process and the criteria that must be met before making an application, as well as matters he should consider before applying. The solicitor advised Nic to seek specialist legal advice from a migration law practitioner.
6. The Advocate took note of the recommendations of the solicitor. After the meeting, the Advocate ensured Nic understood the advice given by the solicitor. The Advocate then supported Nic to seek specialist advice from a migration lawyer through his social worker.

The social worker sent a referral to a specialist immigration law organisation for Nic so that he had access to the necessary advice and guidance he needed.

Outcomes

Nic has now been granted aftercare support and is in the process of aftercare planning. He is actively pursuing his next steps in education, with support from his Advocate. He also has received the appropriate information and guidance to equip him should he wish to pursue Irish citizenship in future. Nic was satisfied with the outcome and the case was closed.

Note: The names of children and young people in these case studies have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Case Study

Anna

Anna is a young care-leaver who was residing in rental accommodation which she found unsafe. Anna had recently ended a violent relationship. However, her former partner continued to display abusive behaviour, and would continuously show up at her property without her knowledge or consent and refuse to leave. In these events, Anna would call the Gardaí and the ex-partner would leave, but he would return when the Gardaí had left the property.

Main Presenting Issues

- Anna needed advocacy support to move house for her safety.
- Anna was receiving rental supports from her local authority and wanted advice on how to move house while retaining these supports.
- Anna felt she needed the support of an Advocate in meetings with her keyworker to ensure her views were adequately represented and given due consideration.

Key Actions Taken by Anna's Advocate

1. The Advocate arranged a meeting between the keyworker and Anna, which the Advocate attended.
2. With the support of the Advocate, Anna explained what she was being subjected to by the ex-partner. The keyworker took note of the issues, and some immediate steps were taken by the service to ensure additional safeguarding.
3. The keyworker committed to raising Anna's request to move property with their manager.

Outcomes

The keyworker brought Anna's request to move to a safer accommodation to their management and included a letter of support from the Advocate. Anna's request was granted, and Anna moved to another property. Anna is now living in a place which the ex-partner has no access to, and Anna feels safer. Anna was happy with the outcome and her case was closed.

Case Study

Lucy

Lucy is 17 years old and has been living in a Tusla residential care placement for over 12 months since she arrived in Ireland as an unaccompanied minor seeking international protection. Lucy became aware of EPIC's Advocacy Service after meeting an Advocate who conducted an information session with her in her placement. Lucy referred herself to EPIC because she was frustrated and upset by what she felt was inaccurate information being recorded by placement staff about her behaviour in daily logs and other records.

Main Presenting Issues

1. Lucy requested independent advocacy to understand her rights and available options to address the issue.
2. Lucy requested support from her Advocate in contacting her social worker about the situation and communicating her perspective.

Key Actions Taken by Lucy's Advocate

With Lucy's permission, Lucy's Advocate contacted her social worker and shared Lucy's perspective on what she felt was happening in her care placement and the impact this was having on her.

The Advocate met with Lucy in person to discuss additional steps Lucy could take in further addressing the issue, including: writing a formal letter detailing her concerns and perspective to the relevant professionals involved; engaging in the complaints process within the care home; and as a final step when all other options were exhausted, filling out a Tusla TellUs complaint.

With the Advocate's support, Lucy wrote a letter detailing her concerns regarding the issues in her care placement and the impact this was having on her. She requested that her Advocate share this with her social worker, their team leader, and her residential placement manager.

Outcomes

The professionals involved acknowledged Lucy's letter and committed to responding to its contents directly. It was agreed that Lucy would be facilitated to write her own account of events, which would be added to her records alongside those of the residential care staff, in circumstances where Lucy felt her perspective was not being adequately captured. The placement manager also committed to discussing the contents of Lucy's letter with the staff team at their next team meeting for them to better understand Lucy's perspective. Lucy felt then her main presenting issues were resolved, and the case was then closed.

Case Study

Aideen

Aideen is a care-leaver who is homeless. She has been experiencing significant mental and physical health challenges because of her recently diagnosed disability. She was receiving a Jobseeker's Allowance but felt that she could not maintain a job due to her diagnosis and associated health difficulties. However, as she was receiving a Jobseeker's Allowance, social welfare staff were directing her to pursue work. Aideen had become homeless and was 'couch-surfing' between family, friends, and her previous foster family.

Aideen's Advocate felt that emergency accommodation would have a detrimental effect on her, and that Aideen needed support to secure permanent accommodation as a matter of urgency.

Main Presenting Issues

- Aideen sought advice on how to move her social welfare allowance from the Jobseeker's Allowance to the Disability Allowance.
- Aideen also needed information on how to apply for housing with her local authority, as a matter of urgency, and support to make an application.

- Aideen has significant, ongoing mental and physical health issues, which required a high level of engagement from her Advocate to assist her to achieve her intended outcomes. As Aideen had no permanent address, she was not attending a community mental health service.

Key Actions Taken by Aideen's Advocate

1. Aideen's Advocate worked with her to apply for housing under 'Exceptional Social Grounds,' due to her living circumstances and her health issues.
2. The Advocate assisted Aideen in setting up a Post Office temporary address for all her essential post.
3. The Advocate worked with Aideen to gather all the required documents necessary to receive Disability Allowance, including letters from her GP and specialists, and assisted her in submitting these alongside a letter from EPIC's Advocacy Service.
4. COVID-19 restrictions and the ongoing housing crisis affected the timely processing of Aideen's application, which required the Advocate to provide constant support to Aideen as well as seeking updates from the local authority, which both Aideen and her Advocate undertook.
5. Aideen was eventually successful in her housing application, and she was offered Council Housing. However, the house was unfurnished, and Aideen was not in a position to fully furnish it herself. Her Advocate referred her to her Community Welfare Officer and underlined the need for the CWO to support her in this regard, while also assisting Aideen to apply for alternative grants which might be appropriate for her.
6. Aideen's Advocate also worked with Aideen to access community mental health services.

Outcomes

Due to Covid restrictions and the ongoing housing crisis, this case took a significant amount of time to resolve, and considerably affected Aideen's mental health, which in turn affected her ability to self-advocate and required her Advocate to work more closely with her.

Aideen is currently maintaining her own Council Housing; she has changed her address to her permanent home. Aideen is also attending her local community mental health service and continues to receive Disability Allowance. Aideen was happy with the help provided by her Advocate and the case was closed.

Case Study

Daniel

Daniel is a child in voluntary care. Daniel's foster placement broke down due to difficulties within the foster family. He subsequently experienced several difficult placement breakdowns, and an extended stay in special care. His physical and mental health deteriorated, resulting in behavioural issues with professionals. Daniel was then placed in a Special Emergency Arrangement (SEA), outside of his home county. Daniel felt cut off from his community and his social supports. Daniel was assisted to contact EPIC by his social worker. Daniel felt that his views on his care placement were not being heard or taken seriously, and he wanted to communicate how this made him feel to a Judge.

Main Presenting Issues

- Daniel requested an advocacy service to advise him on how to have input on his care placement, which he felt could only be achieved by providing information to a judge as is the practice for children under statutory care orders.
- Daniel sought guidance on how to have his case brought before the courts given there was no judicial oversight of his case due to his being in voluntary care.
- Daniel wanted to know if a guardian ad litem (GAL) could be appointed to him were his case to go before a judge.

Key Actions taken by Daniel's Advocate

1. Daniel's Advocate met with him to explain the difference in care orders, the associated practice and oversight mechanisms, and the court process, and explained that they would need to seek legal guidance on how his case could proceed.
2. His Advocate contacted a solicitor, who worked with Daniel and the Advocate to submit a motion to the judge under section 47 of the Child Care Act, 1991. This motion would also allow for the appointment of a GAL.

Outcomes

Daniel was successful with his application to have his case brought before the court. He also had a GAL appointed to support him in having his voice heard in the court proceedings. He was also successful in securing a new care placement as a result of his motion before the court. Daniel was satisfied with this result and the case was closed.

Conclusion

The 2022 analysis of EPIC's National Advocacy Service demonstrates the diverse range of challenges that children in care and care-leavers can experience. In 2022, the growing housing crisis and the increasing cost of living crisis were evident in the cases dealt with at EPIC.

The easing of COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland marked a return to services in many parts of the care system. Assisting children and young people who eagerly awaited this return became a focal point of our work. However, issues stemming from the earlier restrictions, such as limitations on family access or placement moves, persisted, adding further challenges for those relying on their return.

Although EPIC has a history of supporting unaccompanied minors and separated children, 2022 brought a significant increase in children seeking international protection, leading our Advocates to navigate new areas in upholding children's rights. This, coupled with the "unprecedented pressure" on the Irish care system as described by the Child and Family Agency, highlights that the care system is interconnected with broader societal challenges that can impact children in care and care-experienced young people profoundly. It also demonstrates that Ireland's commitments to the protection of children and refugees under international human rights and humanitarian law is a complex and evolving endeavour.

Furthermore, in a year when issues affecting children and young people with care experience became increasingly complex, the importance of independent advocacy has been further emphasised.

In conclusion, throughout 2022 we remained heartened by the professionalism and goodwill displayed by our colleagues across the sector, who rallied to support children in care and care-experienced young people in the face of substantial adversity. We commend the professionals and services with whom we collaborate and eagerly anticipate our ongoing, positive partnerships in 2023.

Equally, we are deeply appreciative of the trust placed in EPIC by the children and young people we worked with during the year, whose experiences, challenges, and achievements are documented throughout this report.

Social Media Accounts

- Twitter: @epicireland
- Instagram: @epicempoweringpeopleincare



- Facebook: @epicareland
- YouTube: EPIC - Empowering People in Care
- Podcast: thecareexperience.libsyn.com