

National Advocacy Service Report 2021



empowering people in care

Independent Advocacy Service



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Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm



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empowering people in care



In 2021 there were nearly 6,000 children in the care of the state in Ireland, and 3,059 young people in aftercare services. They are not always visible, their voices are seldom heard, and they can be overlooked in public policy discussions that directly affect their lives.

EPIC, Empowering People in Care

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EPIC's Vision

That all children and young people in care and after care have an empowering, positive lived experience of care.

EPIC's Mission

To advocate for the rights of children and young people in care and after care and enable their voice to influence positive change in their own lives and in the care system.

EPIC's Values

- The right of children and young people to be heard, have a voice, be consulted and access information.
- Meaningful participation of children and young people in their care and the care system.
- Meaningful participation of children and young people in EPIC.
- Accountability.
- Solutions oriented.



We are rights-based

EPIC works to ensure the fulfilment of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC) which provides that children have a right to express their views and have them considered in all matters affecting them.

EPIC is guided by Articles 2 and 3 of the UNCRC, which provides for the enjoyment of rights without discrimination and for the best interests of the child to be of paramount consideration.

EPIC promotes relevant national policy and legislation that emphasises the rights of the care-experienced children and young people to be heard, listened to, and involved, in particular, the Child Care Act 1991, the Children First Guidelines and the National Standards for Residential and Foster Care.



EPIC's Commitment

To advance the interests and welfare of children and young people with care experience in Ireland and to positively contribute to care services for the benefit of children and young people, their families and the professionals who work with them.

The Key objectives of EPIC's National Advocacy Service

- Uphold the rights of children in care and young people in aftercare.
- Provide high-quality information, support, and advice.
- Promote the participation of children and young people with care experience in decisions that affect them.
- Ensure all children and young people with experience of being in care know about their right to independent advocacy.
- Work in partnership with others to promote the best interests of the child.



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 2021. 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 2021. This pilot project was made possible by funding from 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 2021, whose experiences and challenges are documented throughout this 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 gives an overview of this Service in 2021 and presents a snapshot of the children and young people who used the Service, and the issues addressed.

The nature of an Advocate's role can vary. From providing basic information, for example supporting a young person to know and understand their rights as they transition to aftercare services, or practical support, like working with other professionals in their life to ensure the best outcomes for them, to a higher level of engagement, where an EPIC Advocate attends a care or aftercare review with a child or young person.

During 2021, a team of nine EPIC Advocates, supported by two Advocacy Managers, worked across Ireland supporting 491 children and young people on a total of 777 advocacy cases. This is EPIC's thirteenth Advocacy Service Report, and the first time in over 10 years that the advocacy caseload dropped, from 853 in 2020 to 777 in 2021.

This decrease is attributed in part to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. During 2021, EPIC delivered most of its information sessions on the Advocacy Service virtually, which may have had an impact on advocacy cases as this format did not allow for in-person interaction between children and young people and an Advocate. The decrease in case numbers also indicates that the number of individual children and young people requiring multiple advocacy cases on a range of presenting issues declined. Despite the overall decrease in caseload numbers, the number of new referrals - i.e. children and young people who had not previously been engaged in EPIC's service - rose by 10%.

In 2021, the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that issues relating to mental health and wellbeing, family contact and access, and a loss of usual social outlets continued, as documented in EPIC's 2020 Advocacy Service Report. For some, these issues intensified. In addition, backlogs in services, long wait times for meetings, and frustrations related to planning and delivery of access visits due to inconsistencies across regions were noted by the Advocacy Service Team.

The data presented in this, and previous Advocacy Reports, is critical in informing the development of EPIC's services and policy. It enables the organisation to recognise and track ongoing and emerging trends, as well as the day-to-day issues experienced by the community of children and young people who seek and receive support from the EPIC National Advocacy Service.



Legislative and rights based - the importance of independent advocacy in Ireland's child protection and welfare system

“Children in care are often isolated with their concerns, without an adult to whom they can talk. Children communicate best when they feel they have a protective figure in whom they can confide. The Department of Health and Children must examine international best practice to establish the most appropriate method of giving effect to this recommendation.”

Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Report, Vol. IV, Dublin, 2009, p.463.

Following the publication of the Ryan Report, a detailed Implementation Plan with 99 actions was prepared and published in July of 2009; the government committed to fully implementing all of them.

The Report, regarding hearing the voice of children in care it stated that: “The HSE and IYJS will ensure that all young people in care and detention are made aware of the work of IAYPIC¹ and will support children should they wish to contact or become involved with the service.”²

EPIC believes that care-experienced children and young people across Ireland should have a right to independent professional advocacy. It fulfils a crucial role in enabling them to communicate their wishes and feelings and to play an active role in decision-making about key aspects of their lives.

Children and young people in care and care leavers are often expected to contend with life changing decisions and formal meetings on a frequent basis throughout their young lives, without the statutory right to independent advocacy. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child makes very clear that every child has the right to say what they think on all matters affecting them and to have their views taken seriously. Advocacy helps to make that right a reality for those children and young people who, for whatever reason, would not otherwise, be able to share their views.

Experience and research from other jurisdictions have demonstrated that in order to safeguard vulnerable children and young people, it is of the utmost importance that independent advocacy is accessible to all.

¹ Irish Association of Young People in Care (IAYPIC) was set up in March 2009 and was re-named EPIC, Empowering People in Care in 2011.

² Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009, Implementation Plan. 2009, p.463.



At EPIC, we believe that:

- Independent advocacy services can and do support statutory authorities to effectively meet their duties as corporate parents to children in care by improving both children's experience of the care system and their outcomes beyond the care system.
- Statutory obligations to support independent advocacy are inadequate, resulting in significant inconsistency in a child or young person's access to an independent Advocate.

EPIC's position is that the following objectives should be pursued to enhance independent advocacy provision in Ireland:

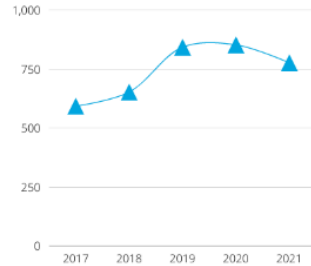
- Independent advocacy should be recognised in legislation, and a monitoring and reporting system for advocacy services should be introduced to ensure that learning from individual advocacy cases leads to improvements in services for all children and young people in care or with care experience.
- The development of a statutory framework for advocacy provision should be prioritised, including National Standards and statutory guidance, to improve access to quality independent advocacy services for children and young people in the care system.
- The commissioning of advocacy services should consider the full range of legislation and regulation, and services should be commissioned on a minimum three-year basis.
- Statutory authorities should work to make children and young people in the care system, and the professionals and other adults involved in their lives, better aware of independent advocacy services and the benefits these services can bring.



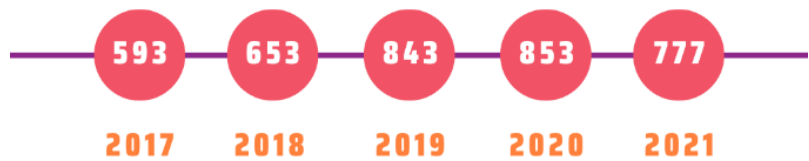
Main Findings from the Advocacy Service in 2021

In 2021, EPIC provided an Advocacy Service to 491 children and young people on a total of 777 advocacy cases.

Advocacy Cases 2017 - 2021



While in the five-year period prior to 2021 there was a 66% increase in advocacy cases, from 500 to 853 cases, demonstrating



increasing need for independent advocacy, 2021 saw a slight drop in both the number of individual children and young people EPIC Advocates worked with, as well as a drop in the number of advocacy cases per child or young person. This decrease was due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, including ongoing lockdowns, reduced services, and limited opportunity for interaction and in-person advocacy information sessions and meetings. Despite the overall decrease in caseload numbers, the number of new referrals to the advocacy service rose by 10 %³.

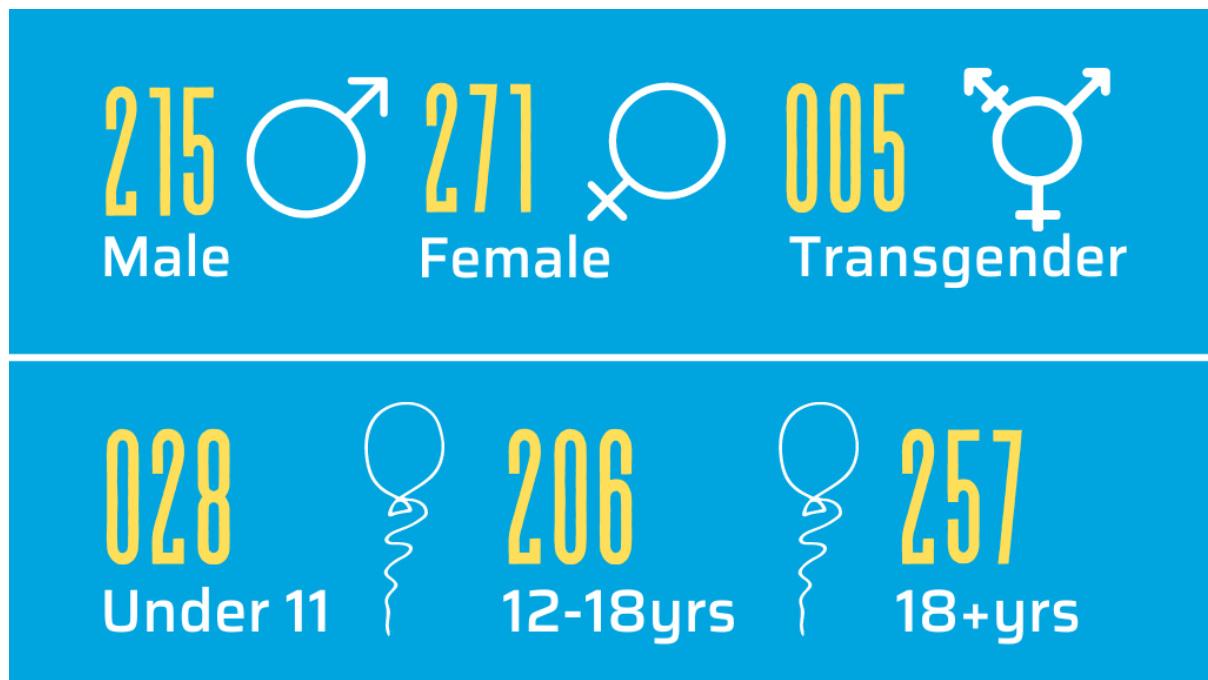
No. of Advocacy cases per young person	No. of young people	Total no. of Advocacy cases
1	342	342
2	81	162
3	32	96
4	17	68
5	10	50
6	6	36
7	1	7
8	2	16
Total	491	777

³ EPIC received 349 new referrals in 2021, a 10 % increase on 2020 figures



Community Demographics

The self-identified gender of the children and young people who requested advocacy is detailed below. In both 2020 and 2021, there was a higher number of girls and young women engaging with the EPIC Advocacy Service, and they also account for a higher number of multiple advocacy cases within the year. A majority of the girls and young woman (179) that engaged with EPIC in 2021 were aged 13-22. The number of young people accessing EPIC's Advocacy Service who identify as transgender rose from one in 2020 to five in 2021⁴, which is a significant increase. Three of these young people had advocacy cases directly related to their gender identity. In 2021, EPIC launched a new pack of resources for LGBTI+ children and young people in care, and the professionals working with them. The resources were developed and informed by LGBTI+ young people from EPIC's Youth Council and BeLonG To's Youth Groups, who experienced coming out or transitioning while in care. It is possible that this project increased the visibility of EPIC's service to care-experienced LGBTI+ young people leading to an increase in referrals.



The age of individuals that received advocacy services ranged from three years old to 48 years old, the latter relating to assistance with Freedom of Information requests as the upper limit of EPIC's age range is 26. 2021 saw a decline in the number of advocacy requests from under 18-year-olds, from 293 to 234, and an increase in young people aged 18+ in need of an EPIC Advocate.

⁴ As children and young people self-identify their gender, there could be others who engaged with the Advocacy Service during 2021 who have transitioned that now identify as either female or male.



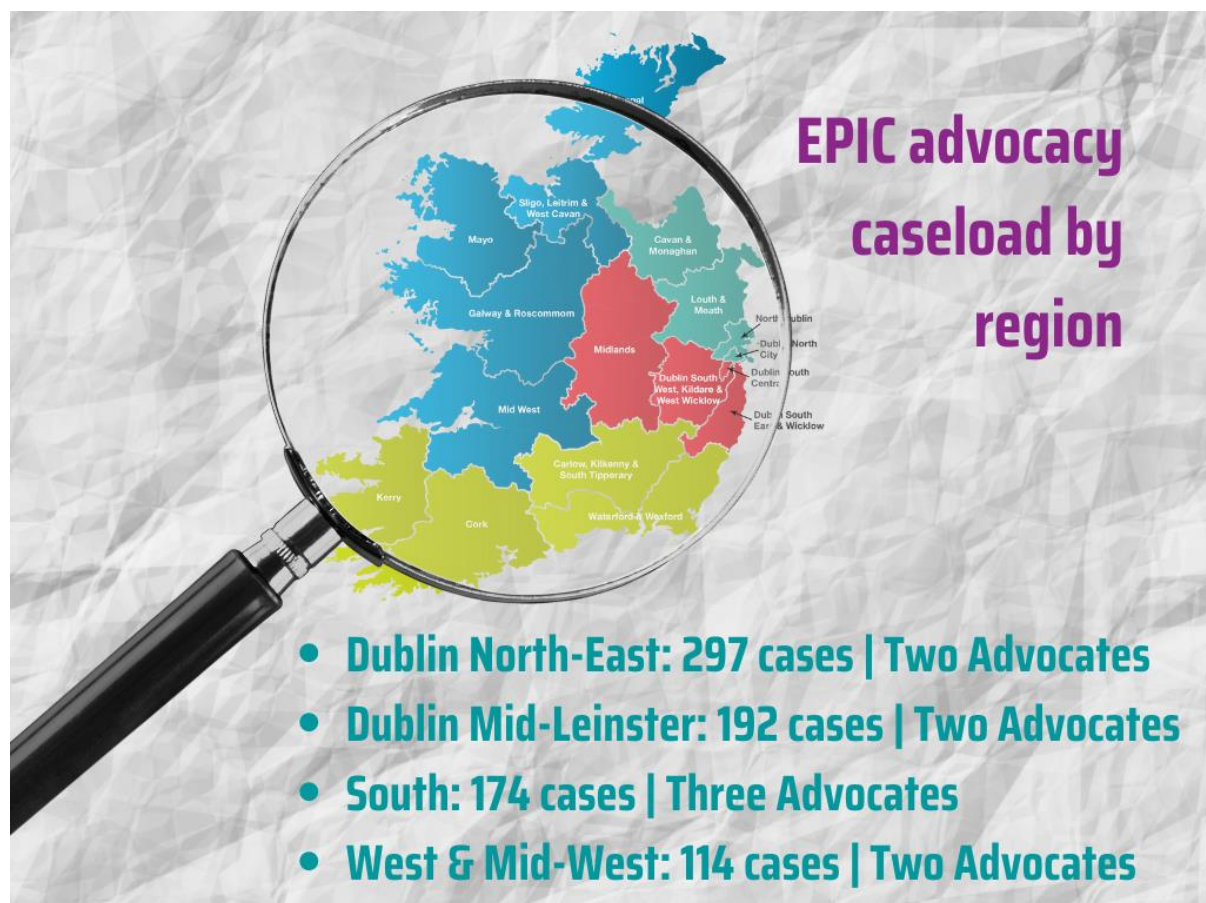
Geographical Spread

Similar to 2020, the 2021 data shows that over half of EPIC's advocacy cases (65%) were in the Dublin North-East (DNE) and Dublin Mid-Leinster (DML) regions. This is in line with Tusla's statistics where the highest number of children in care are in DNE and DML.

In addition to the geographical location where children and young people were currently living, data was also collected on the region responsible for their care. This was collected for the first time in 2013, as it was acknowledged that the region responsible for a care placement may be different to that where a child or young person lives, particularly for those who have left care. This data again showed a higher number of children and young people under the responsibility of the Dublin North-East and Dublin Mid-Leinster regions (63% cases).

Out of all the EPIC advocacy cases in 2021, 190 cases involved a child or young person living in a different area to that which was responsible for their care. This represents almost 25% of the cases EPIC Advocates worked on and an increase on 2020 statistics. Of this cohort, 109 were under 18 years of age.

Those living out of their areas experienced issues relating to the distance between them and their birth families and friends; having to move school; a sense of isolation especially if moved from a populated area to a rural community; the impact of the move on their access visits with siblings and contact with their Social Worker; and in engaging with appropriate services and supports.

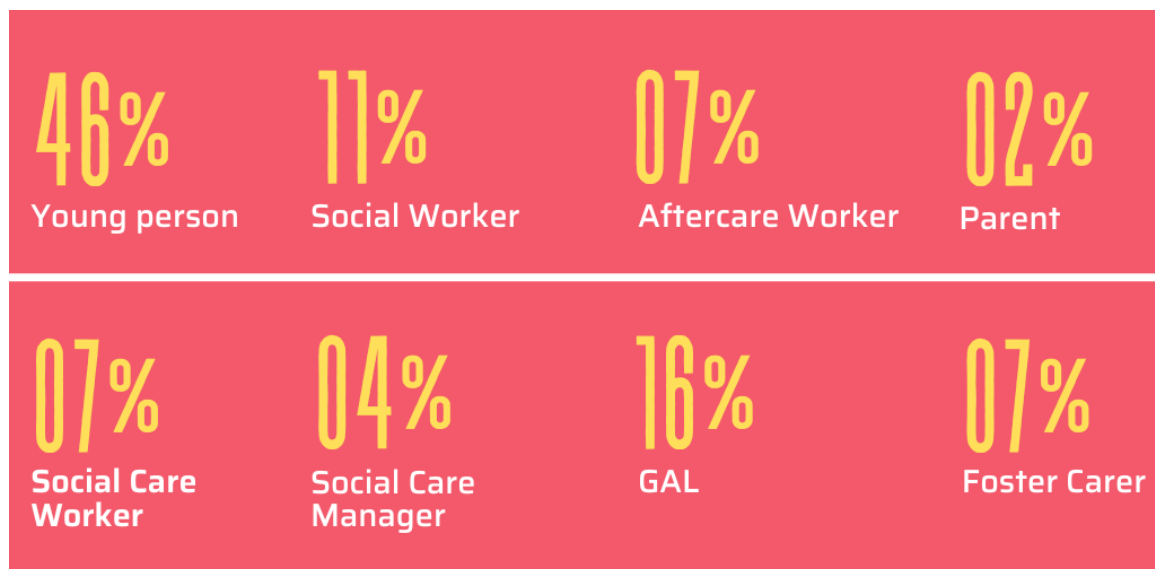




Diagnosed Additional Needs

One in 10 of EPIC's advocacy cases in 2021 involved a child or young person with a diagnosed 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, as 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.

How children and young people contacted the Advocacy Service



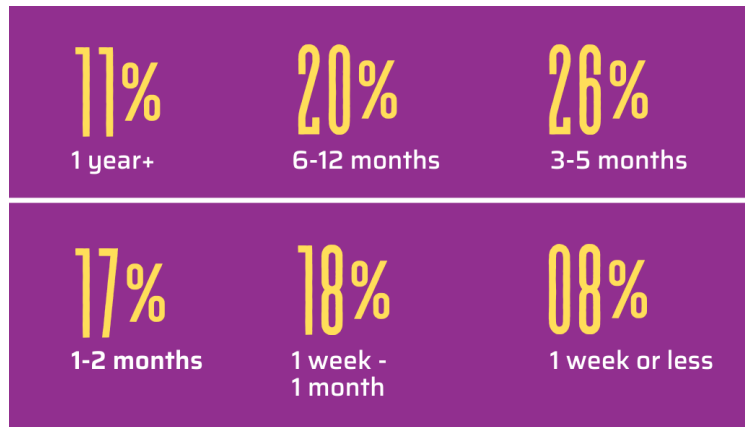
In 2021, nearly half of all requests for advocacy were initiated by children or young people themselves. Children and young people can self-refer to EPIC using EPIC's online referral form. Other people can also refer on their behalf, however the child or young person must provide their consent before a case can be allocated. For those children and young people not in a position to provide consent, these cases are approached as non-instructed advocacy. Non-instructed advocacy occurs where a child or young person cannot give agreement or consent because of age or disability. In these instances, advocacy can be sought on their behalf by their Social Worker, parent, or guardian and the Advocate will:

- Ensure the child or young person's fundamental rights are always respected and upheld by adapting an inclusive approach in line with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- Take time to get to know the child or young person by spending time with them and engaging with those who know them best, including foster carers, residential care staff, Social Workers and birth parents, as appropriate.
- Identify appropriate alternative forms of communication, for example: storyboards or visual resources which might assist or enable the child or young person to express their views and choices.

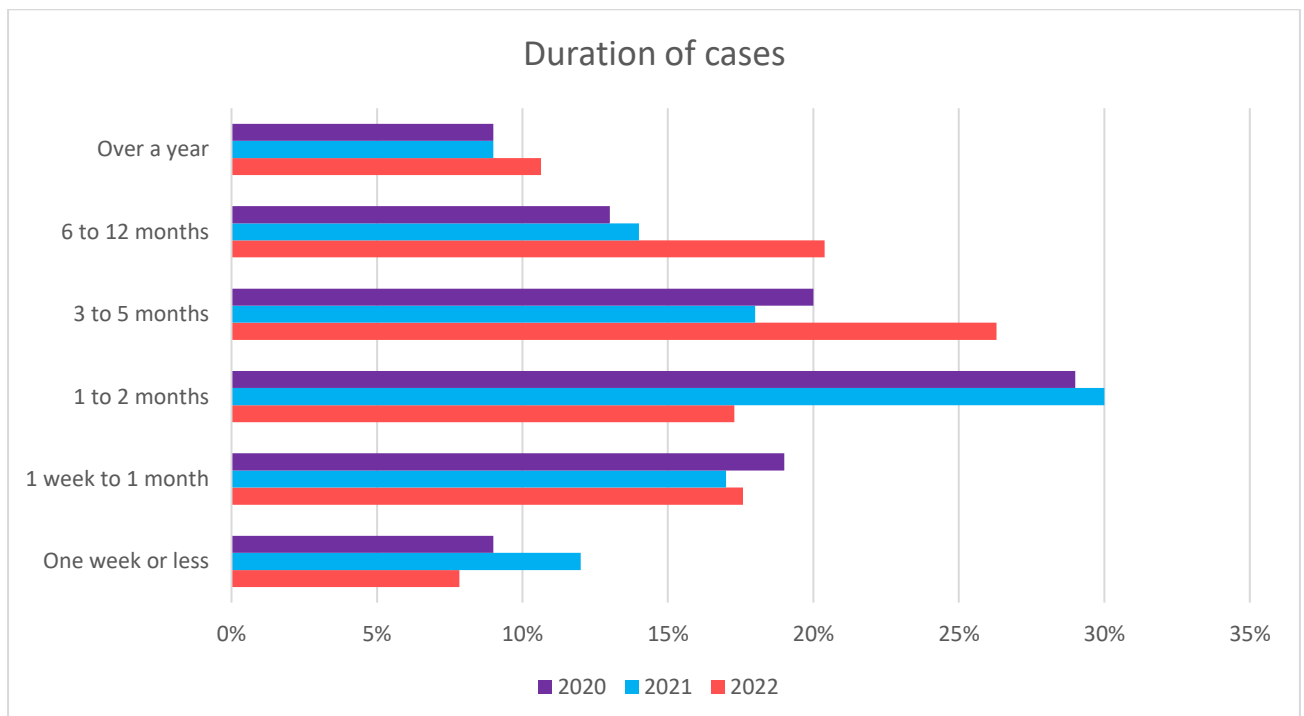


Duration of Advocacy cases

In 2021, over one in 10 advocacy cases lasted for more than one year. This can be due to the complex nature of presenting issues, the specific situation of the child or young person, or when a child or young person disengages for a period of time.



Longer case durations are often related to the fact a child or young person is referred to an Advocate with more than one presenting issue. Cases can also be lengthened due to changes in social work departments, insufficient social worker numbers, and backlogs and wait times for legal proceedings and state services. The circumstances of the child or young person can also result in their ability to engage with independent advocacy being compromised at times – for example, if the child or young person moves placement, or disengages with their Advocate during a difficult personal period, or due to work or study commitments. This impacts on the longevity of the case as the Advocate will not close a case until the issue is resolved.



Case Study

Background

Kate was 17 and living in a residential care home. She was due to sit her Leaving Certificate in June and was expecting a baby in August. Kate was going to turn 18 around the time of the birth of her baby.

Main Presenting Issues

- As Kate was under 18 and still in care, Social Services were engaging with her regarding her pregnancy.
- Kate sought independent advocacy in relation to the meetings with her social work team about the future of her baby, as she was afraid that her child would be taken into care when the baby was born.
- Kate also requested advocacy support in relation to her aftercare plan.

Key Actions taken by Kate's Advocate

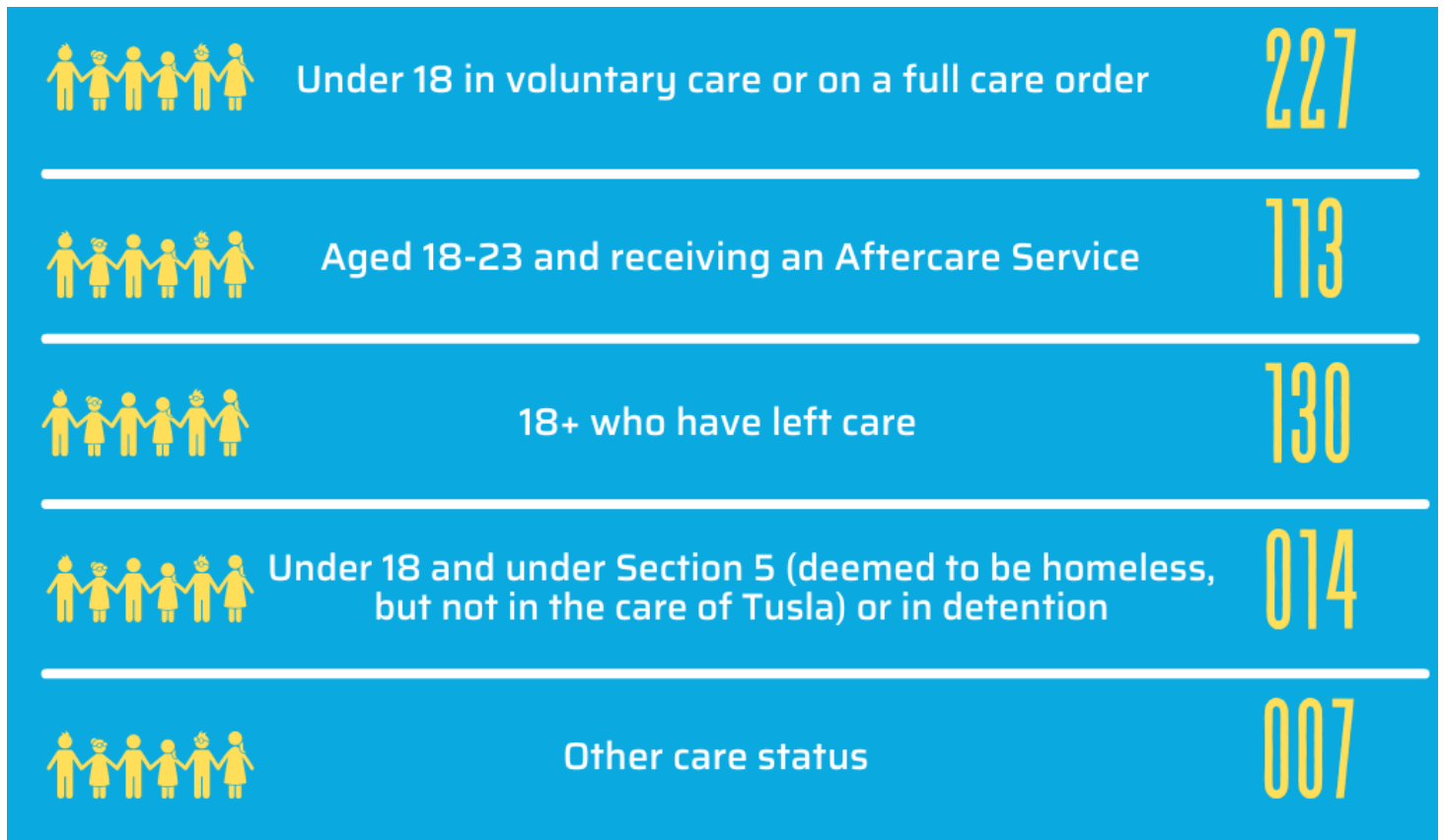
1. Kate's Advocate accompanied her to a pre-birth Child Protection Case Conference during the early stages of her pregnancy.
2. The Advocate met with Kate on a continuous basis throughout her pregnancy to ensure she had up-to-date information from her social work team, was able to share her views and to support her with aftercare planning and preparation for her Leaving Cert.
3. Kate's Advocate met with her after the birth of her child to help her prepare for the second Child Protection Case Conference and attended this with her.
4. Following the discussions between Kate and her Advocate on Kate's aftercare needs and how her transition from care could be best supported, they met with her Aftercare Worker to finalise Kate's aftercare plan.

Outcome

Kate is now living with relatives with her baby, in line with the recommendations from the Child Protection Case Conference and as reflected in her aftercare plan. Her Social Worker continues to check in with her to offer support with the care of her baby, and both Kate and the baby are doing exceptionally well. Kate passed her Leaving Cert exams and hopes to return to education next year when her baby is a little older. The Advocate spoke with Kate three months after her case closed. During their conversation she said that she was very happy with the support she received from EPIC's Advocacy Service and that she had recently referred a friend to the Service.



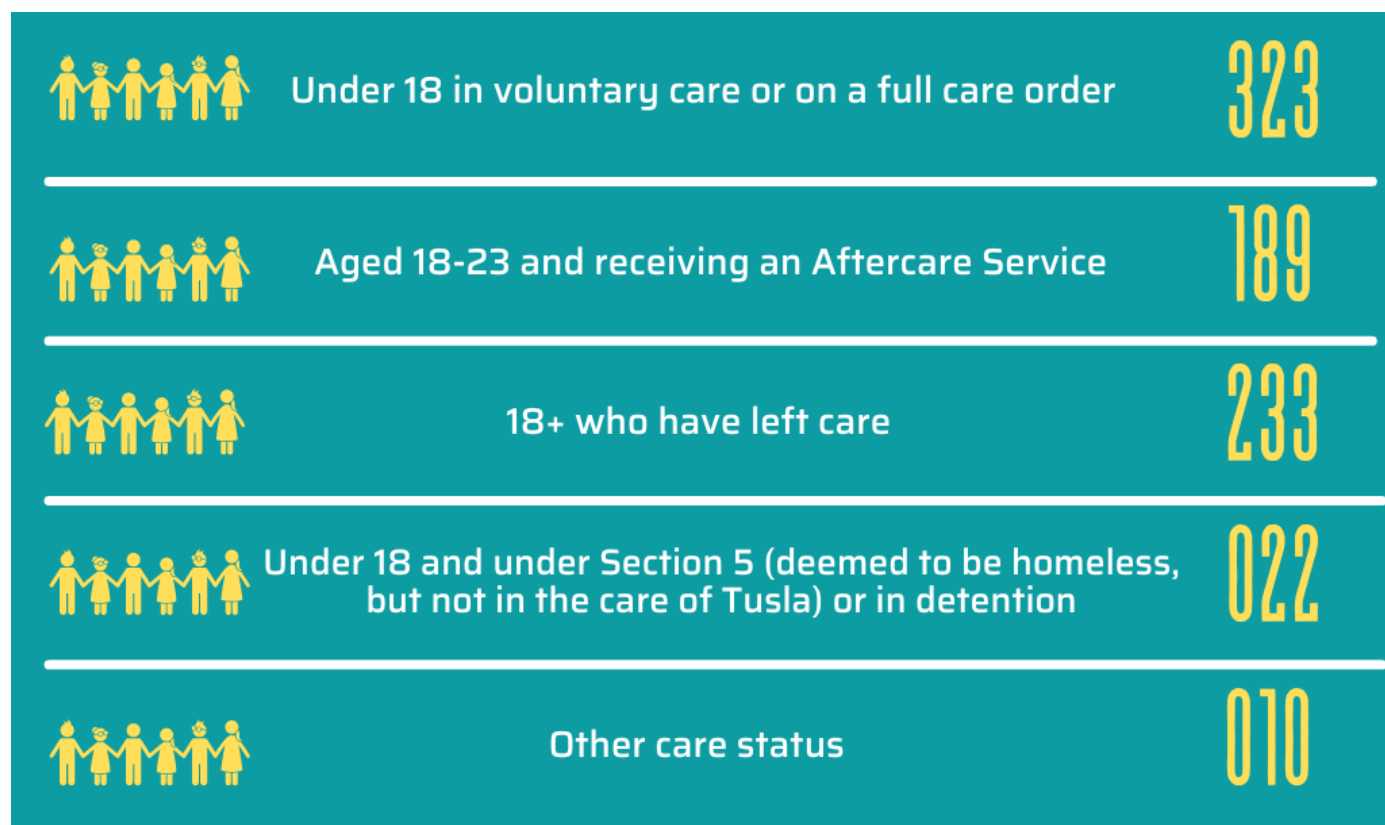
Care status of individual children and young people



Note: '18+ who have left care and are not in receipt of aftercare services' in some cases starts at 17 years old and can include young people who returned home, did not engage with aftercare services, or who are 23+.



Care status of total Advocacy Service caseload



Note: Data on care status is also documented by caseload as some children and young people require more than one advocacy case – see table on page 11.

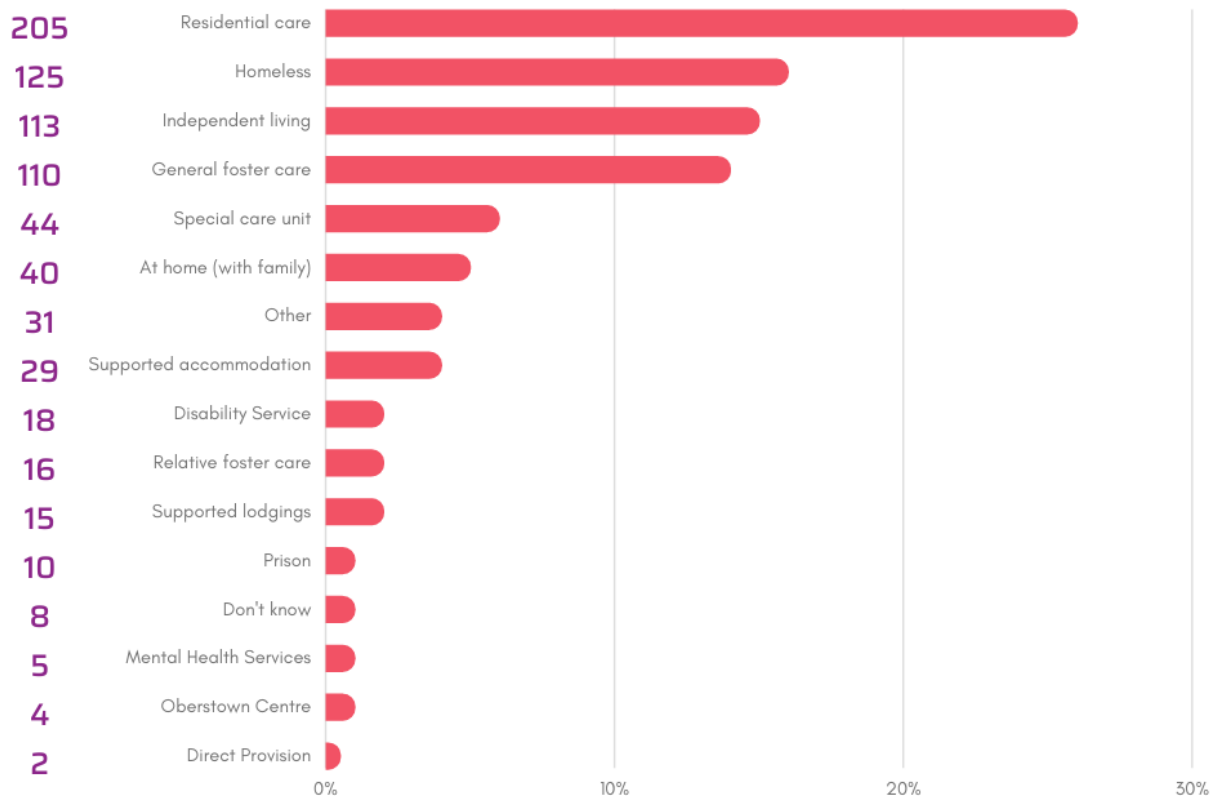
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Care Placement and Living Circumstances

This chart presents the type of care placement or living circumstances of children and young people on a case-by-case basis. During 2021, the majority of new advocacy cases opened related to children and young people who were living in residential care, followed by those who were homeless.⁵

No. of cases



When compared to the previous year, the percentage of cases involving children and young people in residential care decreased from 32 % to 26 %. It is of note that in 2021, the percentage of cases relating to children and young people in special care doubled from 3% to 6 % of the total caseload.

2021 data indicates growing numbers of care-experienced children and young people experiencing homelessness and an increase in advocacy cases across a range of issues for this cohort. In 2021 the number of individual children and young people who were homeless when accessing EPIC's Advocacy Service increased from 62 to 76 in 2021, 15 of whom were 18 and under. In addition, 125 cases, compared to 89 in 2020, related to children or young people who were homeless.

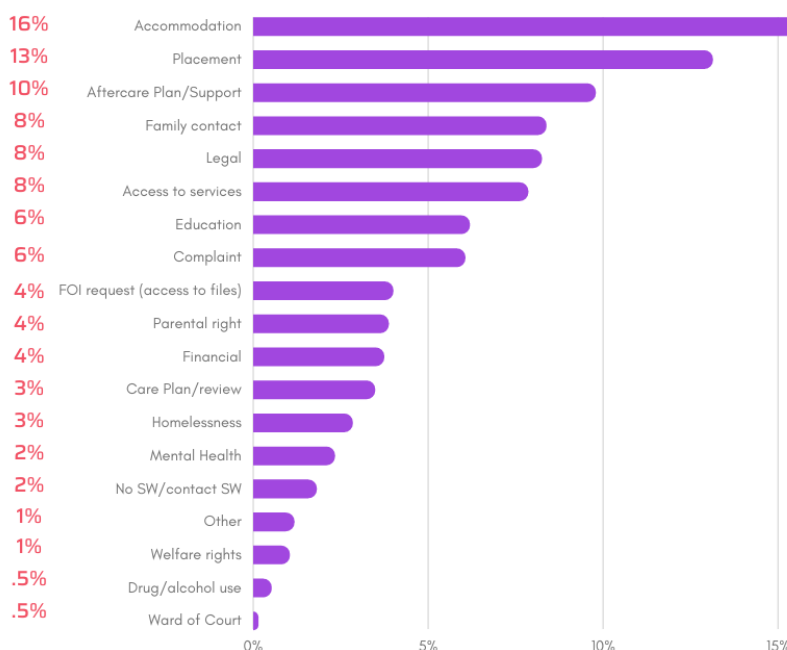
⁵ The definition of homelessness used here is in line with the Youth Homelessness Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2001:11) which defines youth homelessness as sleeping on the streets, in temporary accommodation (e.g., hostels, B&Bs) or in unsecure accommodation with relatives or friends.



Main Presenting Issues

The five main presenting issues in 2021 were:

1. Accommodation (excluding homelessness)
2. Care placement
3. Aftercare
4. Family contact
5. Legal Support⁶



Advocacy cases record the main presenting issue that prompted a child or young person to seek independent advocacy from EPIC. This chart outlines the presenting issues at the start date of cases active in 2021. Many advocacy cases involved multiple, complex issues which only emerged over time. In order to keep the data analysis and reporting manageable, it was necessary to keep the data entry to one or two responses.⁷

In 2021, accommodation was the main presenting issue in one in six of all advocacy cases, reflecting the escalating housing crisis in Ireland and demonstrating the increasing difficulties that young people with a care background face in relation to finding and securing appropriate accommodation to meet their needs.

Advocates worked on a total of 22 cases where homelessness was the main presenting issue, down from 34 in 2020. There are a number of factors that may have contributed to the drop in homelessness as a presenting issue in 2021. With the pandemic ongoing, certain allowances were made including young people not having to move on from care placements upon turning 18 and more flexibility around payments and allowances. Advocates also noted less movement across services during 2021, including homeless services. Lastly, the ban on evictions implemented by the Government as part of its COVID-19 response measures meant a layer of security for renters that previously did not exist.

⁶For example: supporting young people in care and young care-leavers that have children who are subject to ICOs or FCOs; legal advice arising to a child or young person’s care situation; access to housing and tenancy advice; information on the adoption process; DSGBV; citizenship/immigration; and inheritance.

⁷ It is acknowledged that this could have had an impact on the interpretation of the findings reported. For example, mental health is recorded as the main presenting issue for just 2 % (18) of advocacy cases in 2021. However, this is not to say that mental health issues did not arise in other cases, but rather it was not the key presenting issue for these cases.



A new partnership: Community Law and Mediation (CLM) and EPIC Free Legal Advice Project

In the complex area of family law, children and young people in the care system can struggle to access legal information and advice and can face a myriad of challenges in their daily lives both while in care and after turning 18. In response, in late 2020, EPIC partnered with Community Law and Mediation (CLM) to deliver a pilot project on free legal advice for care-experienced children and young people.

The partnership combines EPIC's 22 years of experience working with care experienced children and young people with the 45 years CLM have accrued working with communities at local level empowering them to use the law to improve their lives.

Throughout 2021, the legal clinics operated online or by phone on a monthly basis and were facilitated by a CLM Solicitor. The referral system developed for the clinic was simple and user friendly, with all appointments pre-booked by the child or young person's EPIC Advocate. The Advocate would then support the child or young person to prepare for the legal consultation, attend the session with them, deliver follow up to ensure they understood the information provided by the Solicitor, and support them to implement any necessary actions. Follow up support was also offered by the CLM Solicitor where it was felt it may be required.

In addition to the 30 children and young people that attended and sought legal advice at the clinics, the service also had indirect beneficiaries including birth children, foster parents, and partners of those who attended the clinic. The legal advice sought in several cases directly impacted on the lives of these individuals as evidenced in the case study below.

Training provided to EPIC Advocates by CLM focused on different aspects of the law that an Advocate might engage with as part of their job, enhancing their knowledge and equipping them to identify the appropriate legal avenues necessary when seeking remedies for the children and young people they work with.

In total, 40 legal matters were addressed during 2021 covering areas such as family law, domestic violence, education, child protection, child law, aftercare provision, housing and tenancy rights, immigration and asylum, and criminal law.

The Project enabled the participating children and young people to understand the legal parameters of the problem they faced and assisted them in identifying available options while managing their expectations in terms of the possible outcomes.

030

Community
Law & Mediation

Children availed of
CLM clinic

040



Legal matters were
address

011



Advocates received
training



Background

A young man attended the legal advice clinic with his EPIC Advocate. He had been sharing a local authority property with his birth mother. She had been in breach of her tenancy obligations and had allowed other people stay in the home. She then ultimately abandoned the property. The young man was in a vulnerable position because there had been a serious relationship breakdown with his mother. The client was worried that the property could be repossessed by the local authority. The relationship breakdown with his mother was such that baseless criminal allegations were being made by her against him which further complicated his housing situation. The young man had concerns about the housing situation of his partner who had been living with him and the implications of their having to leave the property.

Advice

The client was advised in relation to his tenancy rights in the family home. He was advised of the rights he had based on the fact that he was a listed tenant on the property and had been keeping up his payment of rent. He was advised on the legal context where a property has been abandoned, succession rights and local authority allocation schemes, including the rules around medical priority.

Potential ways to engage with the local authority were discussed and the young person's EPIC Advocate was available to support him to do this. In addition, the criminal framework of barring orders and other related orders was explained should he have need to employ these, and the implications of the criminal allegations that had been made against him were discussed.

Outcome

The client was successful in engaging with the local authority and securing a new tenancy for himself and his partner, so they did not fall into a precarious housing situation or homelessness. This also gave the young man independence from his mother and the negative environment that had arisen in his old home. He attended court in relation to the allegations made against him by his mother and the case was struck out. After the resolution of his case, the young man visited EPIC's office to thank his Advocate for all the work EPIC and CLM had done in relation to his case. He told his Advocate that he found the additional support and advice provided through the legal clinic of huge benefit.

Advocacy Case Files

The background of the page is a soft, warm-toned photograph of a desk. In the center, a white lamp with a conical shade hangs over an open book. To the left, there is a white mug with a red rim. To the right, there are several stacks of books. The overall atmosphere is calm and studious.

Note: Each case study gives an overview of the main issues arising and summarises the work done by EPIC Advocates to address the concerns raised. To protect the children and young people concerned, all names have been changed along with other identifying information including gender, age, geographical location, family background and care history.

Jeremy | Aftercare Plan

Background

Jeremy, a wheelchair user, requested independent advocacy when he was approaching his 18th birthday. With only two weeks to go, he still had no formal aftercare plan in place in relation to where he would live and what supports he could expect to have after turning 18.

Main Presenting Issues

- Jeremy was worried about the breakdown of his foster placement upon 18 and with no clarity on where he would live, he feared ending up in homeless accommodation.
- Jeremy had great support in his school and did not want to have to suddenly give this up. Jeremy was due to sit his Leaving Cert the following summer and so it was important to him that he remained in the same school.
- Jeremy wanted to know what supports he would receive to enable him to live a full and active life, including transport to and from school and medical appointments; the ability to link in with social networks and supports and to see friends and family; and to access educational and training opportunities moving forward. Jeremy would also need supports in relation to personal care tasks and wanted clarity on provision of such.

Key Actions taken by Jeremy's Advocate

1. Jeremy's Advocate worked with him to identify each of the areas that were most concerning to him and offered advice and support.
2. The Advocate received Jeremy's permission to liaise with the relevant professionals involved in his situation. Through this engagement, the Advocate was able to explain to Jeremy what stage the planning was at, and what the considerations were.
3. The Advocate obtained legal advice on Jeremy's behalf with Jeremy's consent and supported Jeremy to request an in-person meeting with the relevant professionals with responsibility for his care. At this meeting, Jeremy was supported to explain his lived experience and the stress the uncertainty of his circumstances had caused.
4. The Advocate continued to attend meetings with Jeremy's permission to track progress and support Jeremy's input.

Outcome

Jeremy received a commitment in writing from the relevant agencies involved in his care on the planned provision of supports and services as part of his aftercare plan. It also stated that Jeremy would be accommodated in a location where he could access these. This offered Jeremy the reassurance he needed, particularly regarding his being able to remain in his school. While this case is ongoing and resolution has yet to be reached, Jeremy has felt supported to have his views heard and considered, and he continues to work with his Advocate in the hope of securing the supports and services to which he is entitled.

Joe | Aftercare

Background

Joe had been living in a children's residential centre for unaccompanied minors when his Advocate first met him at age 17. He had arrived in Ireland when he was 16 years old and was in the process of applying for refugee status. This process had been delayed in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Joe's application for refugee status was still ongoing when he turned 18, he would be moved out of his residential care placement and into an International Protection Accommodation Service (Direct Provision) centre in another county. Joe wanted clarification in relation to his aftercare entitlements.

Main Presenting Issues

- Joe requested independent advocacy to understand aftercare and clarify his rights and entitlements as he awaited a decision on his refugee status.
- Joe was anxious about moving to another county and living in Direct Provision where he would be sharing a bedroom with people who were unknown to him.
- Joe was also concerned about his ability to continue attending a course he had started. He was not eligible for an aftercare allowance as he had not received a decision on his asylum application, and he therefore would not be able to afford the costs of traveling to and from another county each day to attend his course.

Key Actions taken by Joe's Advocate

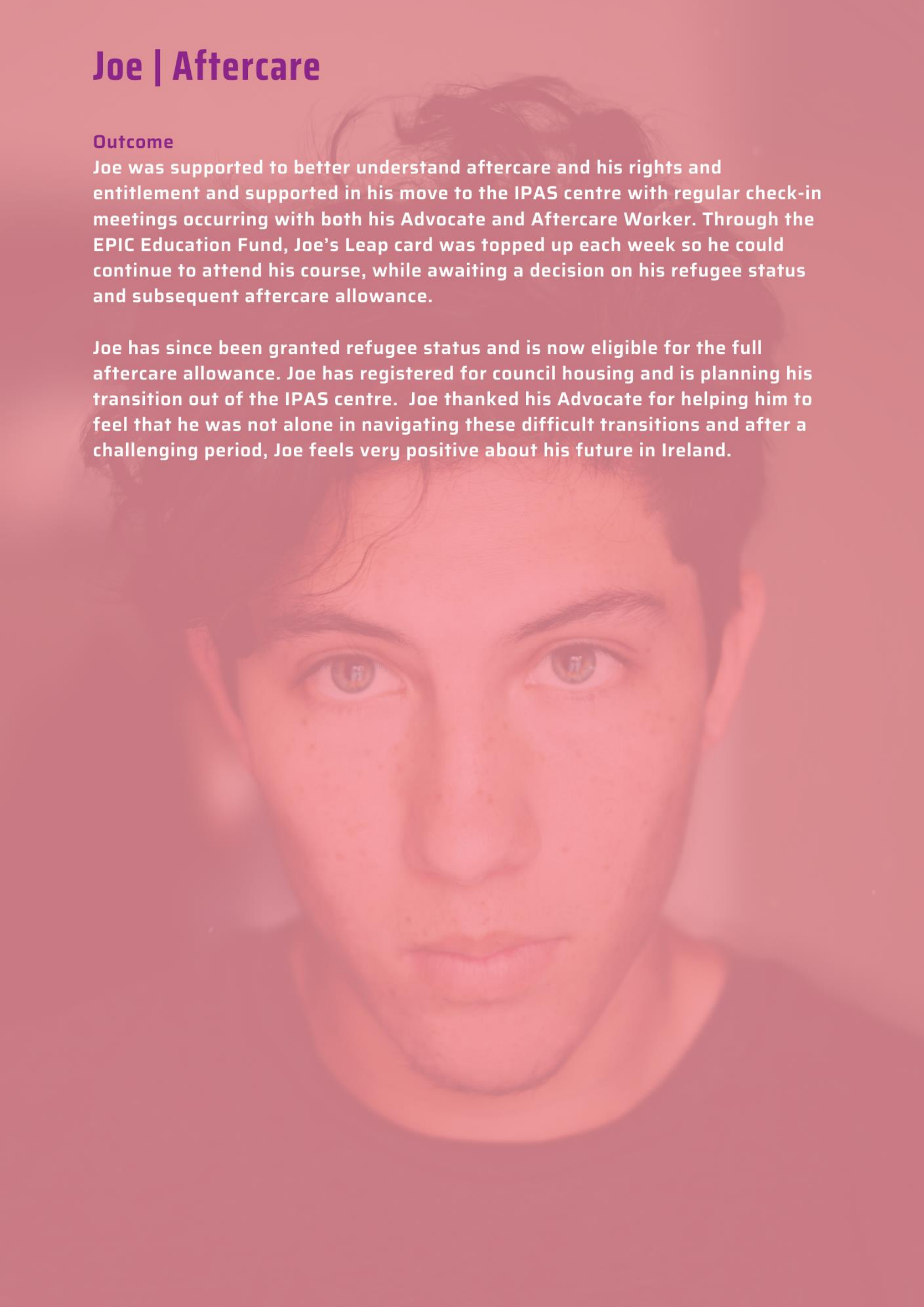
1. The Advocate, with Joe's permission, contacted his Tusla Social Worker and Aftercare Worker to raise his concerns with them. A meeting was arranged between Joe, his Advocate and Tusla to discuss his aftercare plan and entitlements in further detail.
2. When Joe moved out of his residential placement and into a Direct Provision Centre, the Advocate and Joe's Aftercare Worker met with him regularly to ensure that he was settling in and felt safe in his new accommodation and county.
3. Joe's Advocate liaised with Tusla regarding the financial situation concerning his travel to and from his course without the support of an aftercare allowance. However, due to Tulsa's current aftercare policy, this could not be processed until a decision had been made on Joe's asylum application.
4. With Joe's consent, his Advocate made an application to EPIC's Education Fund on his behalf for financial assistance for transport to and from his course each day.
5. Joe's Advocate also supported him in liaising and corresponding with his solicitor to ensure he was kept updated on his asylum application.

Joe | Aftercare

Outcome

Joe was supported to better understand aftercare and his rights and entitlement and supported in his move to the IPAS centre with regular check-in meetings occurring with both his Advocate and Aftercare Worker. Through the EPIC Education Fund, Joe's Leap card was topped up each week so he could continue to attend his course, while awaiting a decision on his refugee status and subsequent aftercare allowance.

Joe has since been granted refugee status and is now eligible for the full aftercare allowance. Joe has registered for council housing and is planning his transition out of the IPAS centre. Joe thanked his Advocate for helping him to feel that he was not alone in navigating these difficult transitions and after a challenging period, Joe feels very positive about his future in Ireland.



Sarah | Care Placement

Background

Sarah is twelve years old and had lived with her foster family since birth. Due to circumstances outside Sarah's control, she could no longer live with her foster mum and dad. As an interim measure, Tusla placed Sarah in the care of her foster sister who was starting the process of applying to be a foster carer for Sarah. Sarah was aware that her foster sister may not be approved as a foster carer and requested independent advocacy to support her to have her views heard in relation to where she wanted to live.

Main presenting issues

- Sarah was worried she may not be able to continue living with her foster sister.
- She wanted to know more about the fostering assessment process.
- Sarah wanted to know who makes the decisions and how she could share her views with the decision makers.

Key Actions taken by Sarah's Advocate

1. Sarah met with her Advocate a number of times which allowed for a safe and trusted relationship to be built. This enabled her to open up about her fears and anxieties.
2. Sarah gave her consent for her Advocate to speak with her Social Worker and GAL who were key stakeholders in her care planning.
3. Over the following months, Sarah's Advocate attended several Child in Care reviews and professional meetings on her behalf to represent her views and thoughts in relation to where she wanted to live. In addition to these meetings, Sarah's Advocate supported her in writing a letter to the Foster Care Committee Chair detailing her position on where she wanted to live.
4. Throughout the whole process Sarah was supported by her Advocate to speak to all the key stakeholders in her life.

Outcome

Sarah's foster sister was approved as a foster carer which meant Sarah could continue to live with her. Sarah was at the centre of all decisions that were made, and she was kept informed of the fostering process in a child-centred way during the assessment, with her views taken into consideration throughout. Sarah told her Advocate that she valued the support she received from EPIC and that she felt that the advocacy helped her in feeling less uncertain about her future.

Lucy | Care Placement

Background

Lucy was almost 17 and had been in the same foster placement since she was three months old. After seeking independent advocacy, Lucy described things to her Advocate as having always been tough for her. In her view, things at home had started to deteriorate further and she wanted support to feel respected and heard.

Main Presenting Issues

- The relationship between Lucy and her foster carer had grown tense. Lucy discussed instances of verbal abuse and said that she felt that her foster carer was condescending towards her.
- Lucy wanted a bit more freedom and privacy, and to be allowed spend time with her boyfriend.
- Lucy also wanted to explore the possibility of moving somewhere else.

Key Actions taken by Lucy's Advocate

1. Lucy's Advocate contacted her Social Worker and set up a meeting between Lucy, her Social Worker and the EPIC Advocate. In the meeting, Lucy's Social Worker agreed to initiate a meeting with Lucy and her foster carers.
2. Together, Lucy and her Advocate explored the issues that were troubling her, and the Advocate helped and supported Lucy to prepare a plan, including possible solutions. The Advocate also helped Lucy with preparation to present her plan to her foster carers and Social Worker at their scheduled meeting.
3. Lucy's Advocate linked in with her before and after each meeting and followed up on the progress of the agreed plan with both Lucy and her Social Worker to ensure it was being implemented.

Outcome

Lucy met with her Social Worker and her foster carers. She put forward her plan and negotiated to find solutions that they could all move forward with. Some home rules were agreed, and in return her foster carers agreed to respect Lucy's privacy and knock before coming into her room. They also agreed that she could spend more time with her boyfriend on alternate weekends and that they would support her to have more social time with her friends. Lucy agreed to give the new plan a go, and over several months she reported back to say she that was getting on much better in her placement. Lucy continues to link in with Advocate for support when needed.

This advocacy case is a good example of the role independent advocacy can play in resolving tensions that could have resulted in more serious circumstances, including a potential placement breakdown, had they continued to escalate.

Joyce | Accommodation

Background

Joyce was in the care of Tusla for most of her childhood. As such, she qualified for aftercare services when she turned 18 until her 21st birthday. During this time, Joyce was supported to apply to her local housing authority for housing support. When she was 23, Joyce self-referred to EPIC due to the extremely difficult and challenging environment she was living in at that time and spoke of how the stress of her housing situation was negatively impacting her mental health.

Main Presenting Issues

- Joyce remained on the waiting list of her local housing authority but in the meantime had no safe place to live. Joyce had no family members to support her or that she could reside with temporarily and had no means to rent or secure accommodation on her own due to high rents in the area.
- Joyce was also concerned that her precarious housing situation would affect her ability to complete her college course.

Key Actions taken by Joyce's Advocate

1. On her Advocate's advice, Joyce agreed to submit an Exceptional Social Grounds (ESG) application to her local housing authority seeking priority housing.
2. With Joyce's permission, her Advocate contacted her previous Aftercare Service and they agreed to support her application. They wrote a letter to the local housing authority confirming that Joyce had been in the care of Tusla and advocated for priority housing for her, as did her Advocate.
3. Joyce and her Advocate made a list of other professionals and services she felt comfortable to approach to ask for letters to support her ESG application. This resulted in support letters from Joyce's college and her GP being obtained.
4. Once the supporting documents had been gathered, Joyce and her Advocate completed the ESG application together.
5. Her Advocate also assisted her in writing her own advocacy letter in support of her ESG application.

Outcome

Joyce gained a greater understanding of her rights and entitlements regarding her housing needs and learnt about the ESG application scheme which she was not aware of previously. She also gained a greater understanding of the housing process overall. Shortly after submitting her application, Joyce was granted priority housing with her local authority. Joyce communicated to her Advocate her relief and happiness with this positive outcome and thanked her Advocate for their support and guidance. Joyce also communicated the importance of a stable home while completing her 3rd level course, and the positive impact this security had on her mental health overall.



Conclusion

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a significant impact on care-experienced children and young people. Issues that emerged or were exacerbated in 2020 continued to cause challenges for the children and young people that sought independent advocacy in 2021, and the complexity of service delivery in ongoing pandemic-related conditions caused complications and frustration for both service providers and care-experienced children and young people.

The small reduction in the advocacy caseload in 2021 reflected the impact of the pandemic and the associated restrictions on children and young people and the EPIC Advocacy Service. While Advocates worked hard to engage children and young people online, the high number of information sessions and meetings which had to be held in the virtual space meant that it was difficult to build rapport or trusting relationships which are the foundation of effective advocacy services. It is notable that while the overall caseload figures dropped, the number of children and young people who sought independent advocacy that had not previously come in contact with EPIC rose by 10%.

As was the case in 2020, some children and young people opened multiple advocacy cases with EPIC in 2021. While this demonstrates a level of satisfaction with the service they received and a belief that independent advocacy can help resolve the issues they face, it also reflects that this cohort experience multiple complexities and challenges arising from their care experience which continue over time.

When compared with 2020, the main presenting issues to the advocacy service remained the same, with accommodation being the primary issue for which independent advocacy was sought. While the government put in place emergency measures to support housing and prevent homelessness in the pandemic, the escalating housing crisis and insufficient protections for tenants have resulted in care-experienced children and young people facing systemic barriers while seeking to secure stable accommodation.

A lack of move-on placements had a particular impact on young people in special care and disability services, as reflected in the documented increase in the number of young people seeking advocacy on accommodation in these care placements. The cohort of young people in special care often had to remain longer in their placements than was planned for due to the lack of suitable stepdown support or suitable alternative placements. Meanwhile, EPIC also worked with young people whose access to disability services were withdrawn by the HSE when they turned 18, which in turn impacted on their accommodation. Young people leaving detention also encountered challenges with move-on placements and faced additional and specific vulnerabilities due to the lack of supports in the communities they were returning to.

In 2021, EPIC advocated on behalf of a number of separated young people seeking international protection who were leaving the care of Tusla and moving to International Protection Accommodation Service centres while awaiting a decision on their asylum application. EPIC observed significant distress amongst this cohort who were often moving from settings where they had their own room and shared homes with other young people into dorms in institutional facilities. These young people often were unable to continue in their school or place of education due to the location of the Direct Provision centres where they were moved. These circumstances are not acceptable for young people



who have experienced significant trauma, either in their country of origin or in transit to Ireland, and who lack community and family supports, while also facing additional cultural and language barriers.

Aftercare remained an issue for young people leaving care in 2021 that accessed EPIC's advocacy service. Lack of timeliness in the development of aftercare plans and insufficient numbers of Aftercare workers impacted the ability of young people to transition to independent adulthood with confidence and security. The intersection of disability with aftercare caused significant impediments to young people who experienced uncertainty about what disability services they would receive on leaving the care of Tusla.

The desire for increased family visits was maintained for some young people in 2021. EPIC Advocates supported children and young people to write to and meet with their Social Workers to discuss their feelings about the frequency of contact with birth families. Advocates also helped children and young people to discuss how access visits could be a safer experience. Transition planning for children returning home to birth families was another feature in the advocacy service over 2021.

In conclusion, the fact that the five main presenting issues for independent advocacy remain unchanged year on year indicates systemic issues affecting care-experienced children and young people that require action and national policy and practice level. EPIC stands ready to support initiatives and actions aimed at improving young people's experience of the care system and aftercare services and will play our part in working to resolve these in 2022.

2021 was a difficult year for all young people living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Care experienced children and young people were particularly affected, some of whom experienced additional marginalities and isolation on account of their circumstances. EPIC believes specific mental health supports and therapeutic interventions should be made available to children in care who are experiencing significant difficulties in the face of the global pandemic.

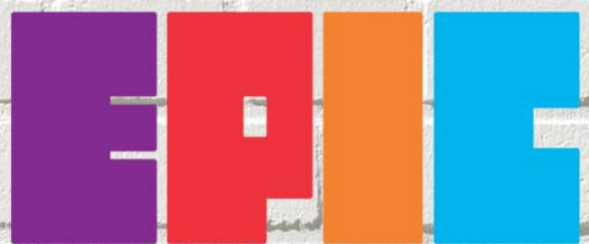
Lastly, we remain heartened by the professionalism and goodwill with which our colleagues across the sector rallied to support children and young people in care in the face of substantial adversity. We commend the professionals and services with whom we engage, and look forward to positive collaboration in 2022.

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