

# Advocacy Report 2020



empowering people in care

# Independent Advocacy Service



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Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm



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empowering people in care



In 2020 there were nearly 6,000 children in the care of the State in Ireland, and 2,943 young people in after-care services. They are not always visible, their voices are not often heard, and they tend to be overlooked in public policy discussions that directly affect their lives.

## EPIC, Empowering People in Care

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## **We are EPIC**

### **Our 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.

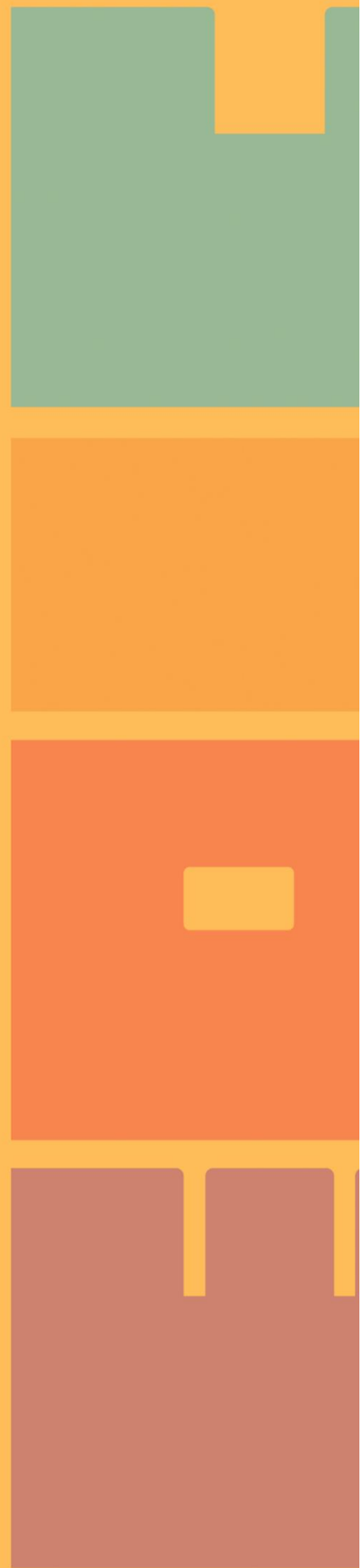
### **Our Vision**

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

### **Our Living Values**



Empowering  
Rights-based  
Inclusive  
Ambitious





# We are EPIC

EPIC, Empowering People in Care (EPIC) is a dedicated team that works with and for children who are currently in the care of the State or who have experience of living in care, young people in aftercare services, and young adults with experience of the care system.

At present, EPIC is the only organisation providing independent advocacy to this community of children and young people. Through EPIC's National Advocacy Service, a team of Advocates work to enable them to have their views and concerns heard and taken seriously, empower them to speak for themselves, help resolve the issues and challenges they experience in care, assist them in accessing the services and resources they need, and bring about positive change in their experience of care and their lives more generally.

To facilitate access to independent advocacy by particularly vulnerable children and young people, EPIC also delivers an on-site Information and Advocacy Service to high support units, special care units, Oberstown Children Detention Campus, and other residential services.



## 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 also 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.

In addition, EPIC respects and actively promotes relevant national policy and legislation that emphasises the rights of the care-experienced to be heard, listened to, and involved, in particular, the Child Care Act 1991, 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, EPIC is guided by key pillars that underpin and drive the organisation's direction.

## The key objectives of EPIC's Advocacy Service

- Amplify the voice of children and young people with care experience.
- Uphold the rights of Ireland's young care-experienced community.
- Provide high-quality information, support, and advice.
- Promote the participation of children and young people with care experience.
- Ensure all children and young people with experience of being in care know about their right to independent advocacy.

# A thank you

The staff team and Board of EPIC would like to thank Tusla - the Child and Family Agency for funding this Service and everyone who has support the work of EPIC during 2020. The success of our advocacy is dependent on collaboration with a wide variety of individuals, organisations and services in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. Each of whom are dedicated to meeting the needs of children in care and young people with care experience and we would like to acknowledge and thank them for their support. We especially wish to acknowledge the children and young people who have engaged with us during 2020 whose experiences and challenges are documented in 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 in issues that affect their lives. This report gives an overview of this Service in 2020 and presents a snapshot of the children and young people who engaged with EPIC's Advocacy Service and the main issues they needed support with.

The nature of an Advocate's role can vary. From providing basic information, for example letting a young person know about pathways to college, and providing practical support, like assisting a young person to secure accommodation if at risk of or experiencing homelessness, to the highest level of engagement, where an EPIC Advocate attends a care or aftercare review with a child or young person to ensure their voice is given due consideration.

This is EPIC's twelfth Advocacy Report, and the number of advocacy cases continues to increase year on year, with a 66% increase over the last five years. During 2020, a team of nine EPIC Advocates worked across Ireland supporting 514 individual children and young people on a total of 853 advocacy cases. 2020, saw 316 new referrals to the EPIC Advocacy Service, an increase of 14% on 2019 figures.

With the pandemic and associated restrictions and lockdowns ongoing, 2020 was another unique year that brought additional challenges for care-experienced children and young people, including mental health and well-being, family contact and access, and a loss of their usual social outlets.

The data presented in this, and previous Advocacy Reports is critical in informing the development of EPIC's services and policy positions. It enables the organisation to recognise and track ongoing and emerging trends and the day-to-day issues being 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 IAYPIC<sup>1</sup> and will support children should they wish to contact or become involved with the service.”<sup>2</sup>

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 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 in 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 or allowed to share their views.

Experience has demonstrated that to safeguard vulnerable children and young people it is of the utmost importance that independent advocacy is accessible to all.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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 strongly believes that the following should be key objectives in relation to the role of independent advocacy in the child protection and welfare system in Ireland:

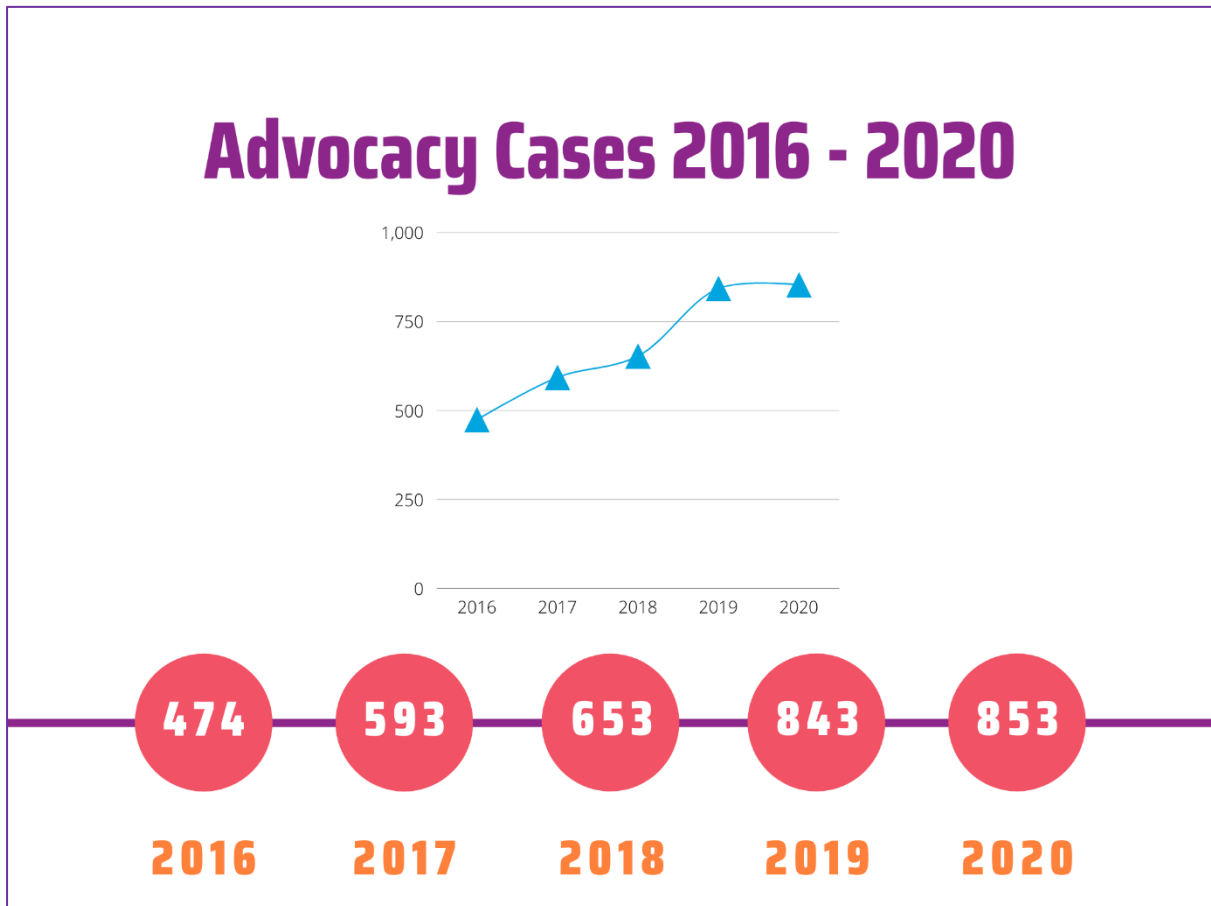
- The development of a statutory framework for advocacy provision, including National Standards and statutory guidance, to improve access to independent advocacy services for children and young people in the care system.
- Independent advocacy should be recognised in legislation, and a monitoring and 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 commissioning of advocacy services should take into account 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, more aware of independent advocacy services and the benefits these services can bring.





## Main Findings from the Advocacy Service in 2020

This report gives an overview of the profile of children and young people that engaged with EPIC's Advocacy Service during 2020, and the issues that were addressed through their advocacy cases.



In 2020, EPIC provided an Advocacy Service to 514 individual children and young people. The total caseload was 853 advocacy cases. This is because as some children and young people have more than one advocacy case during a year relating to different issues.

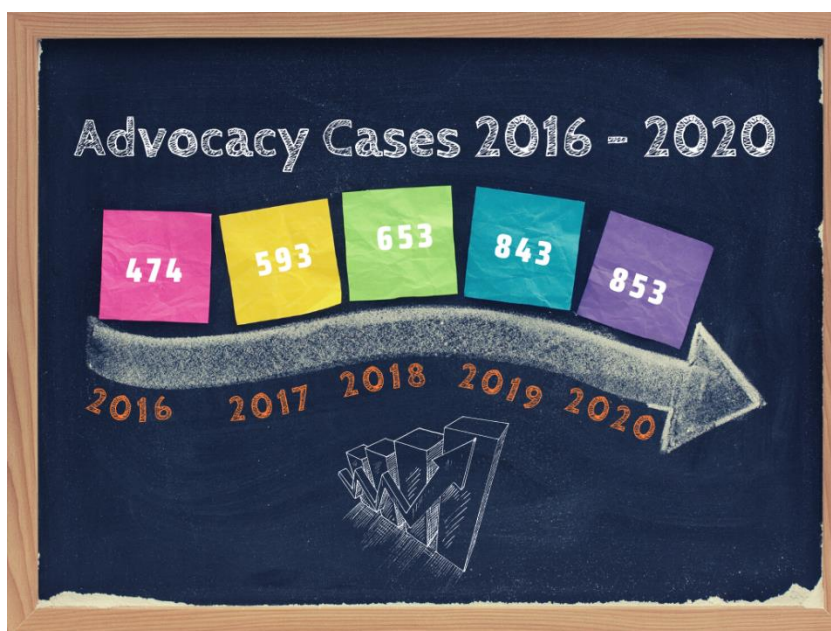






No. of Advocacy cases per young person	No. of young people	Total no. of Advocacy cases
1	333	333
2	103	206
3	45	135
4	18	72
5	7	35
6	2	12
7	2	14
8	0	0
9	2	18
10	1	10
18	1	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>514</b>	<b>853</b>

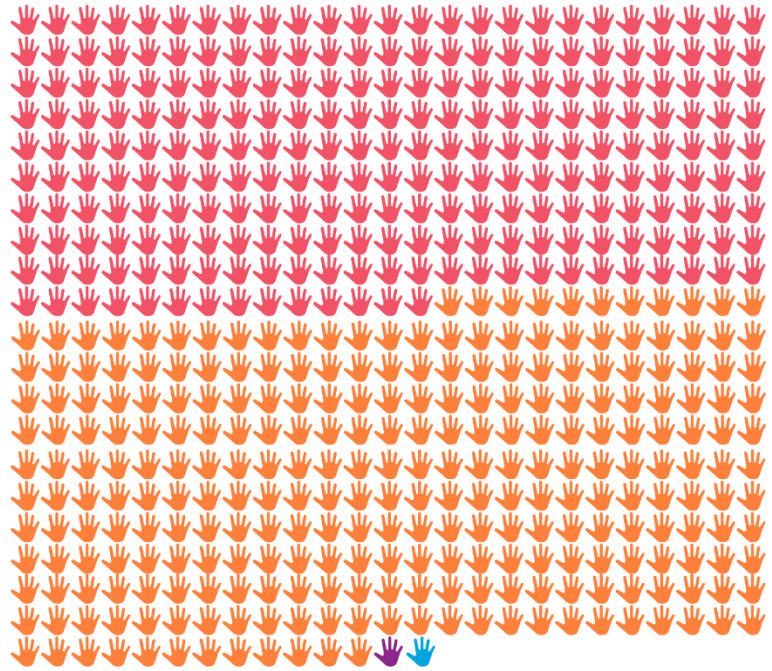
In the five-year period between 2016 and 2020 there was a 66% increase in advocacy cases - from 500 cases to 853 cases - which demonstrates a growing need for independent advocacy year on year. While the increase between 2019-2020 was smaller than in previous years, there was an increase in the number of children and young people who had more than one advocacy case. It is the view of EPIC that this was due to the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic during this period.









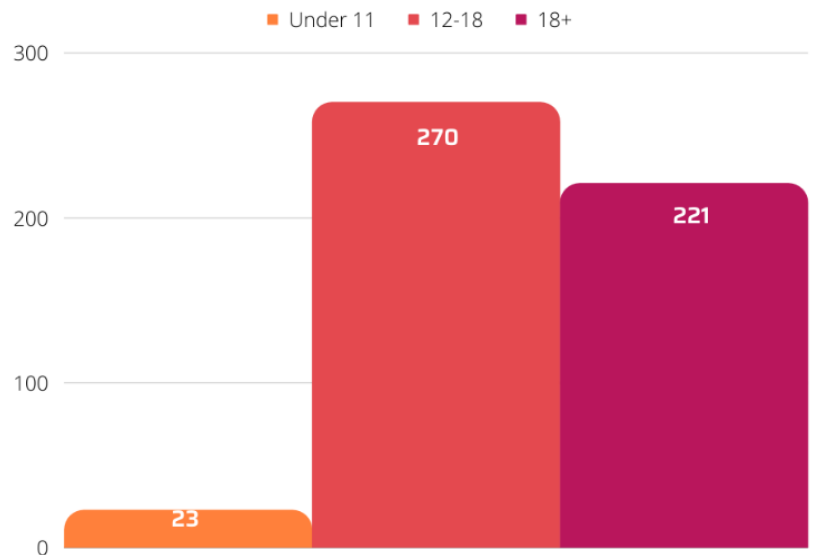
## Community Demographics

The self-identified gender of the children and young people who requested advocacy is detailed below. It is of note that in both 2019 and 2020, almost 6 out of 10 advocacy cases were girls or young women.



 239 Male | he/ him
  273 Female | she/ her
  1 Transgender | they/ them
  1 Other

In 2020, the age of individuals who received advocacy services ranged from three years old to 46 years old, the latter relating to assistance with Freedom of Information requests. Over three quarters of all advocacy cases in 2020 involved young people aged 16+.





## Geographical Spread

The geographical location where children and young people were living at the start of an advocacy case was known for 99% of our 2020 cases.

The 2020 data shows that over half of EPIC's advocacy cases (60%) were in the Dublin North-East and Dublin Mid-Leinster regions.

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 they live, 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 (over 50%).

Further analysis found that out of all the EPIC advocacy cases in 2020, 131 involved a child or young person living in a different area to that which was responsible for their care and represents almost one in ten cases. Those living out of their areas can experience issues relating to the distance between them and their 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 with family/siblings and their contact with their Social Worker; and in accessing appropriate services and supports.

## Diagnosed Additional Needs

One in eight of EPIC's advocacy cases in 2020 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.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The data on this page is based on the EPIC caseload for 2020.

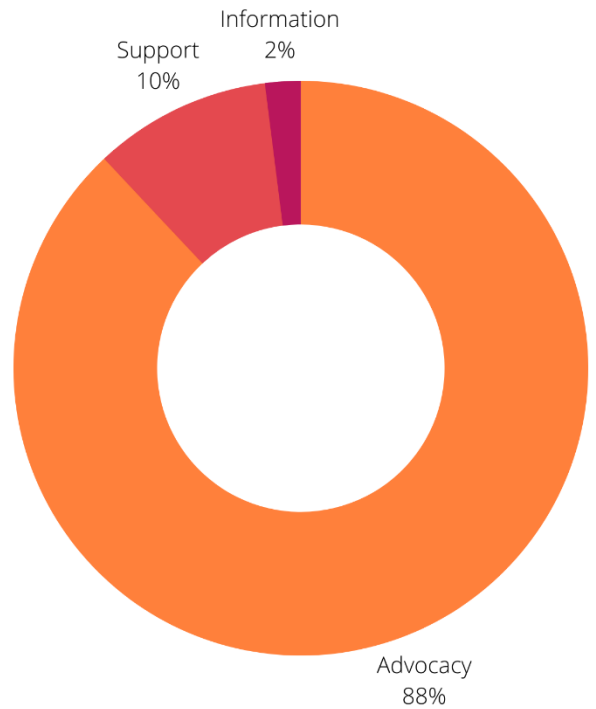




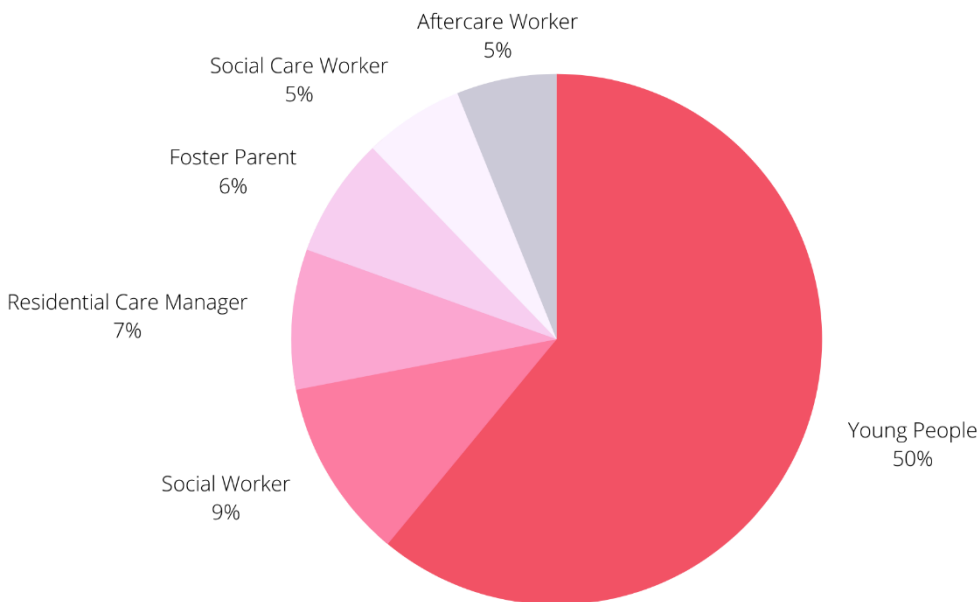


## Purpose of Advocacy Cases

The majority of cases were opened to provide advocacy support to a child or young person. Advocacy is defined here as ‘providing a skilled and independent person to give a voice to and represent the rights of children and young people in care’.



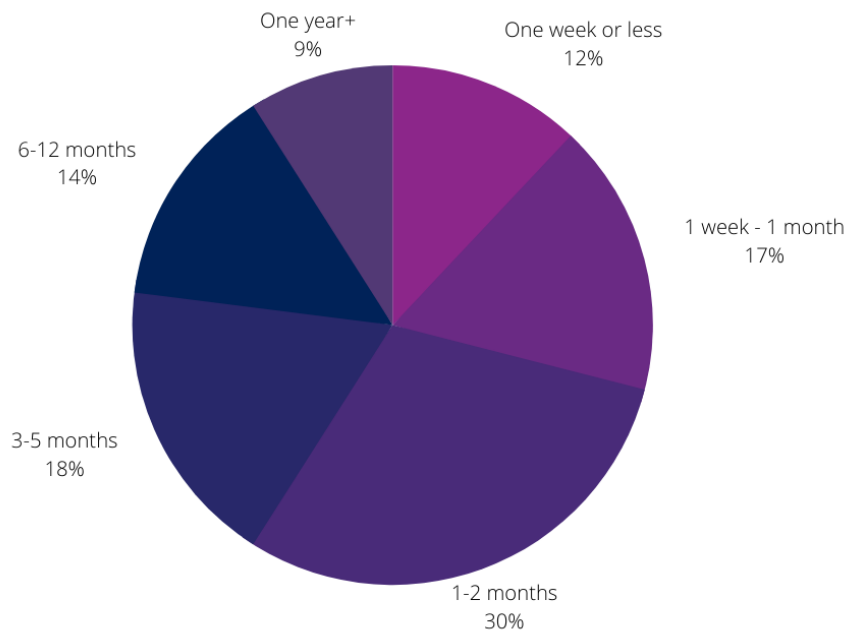
## The person who initiated contact with EPIC



In 2020, 50% of all advocacy cases were initiated by children or young people themselves. Almost one in ten Advocacy cases were opened after an information session delivered by an EPIC Advocate.

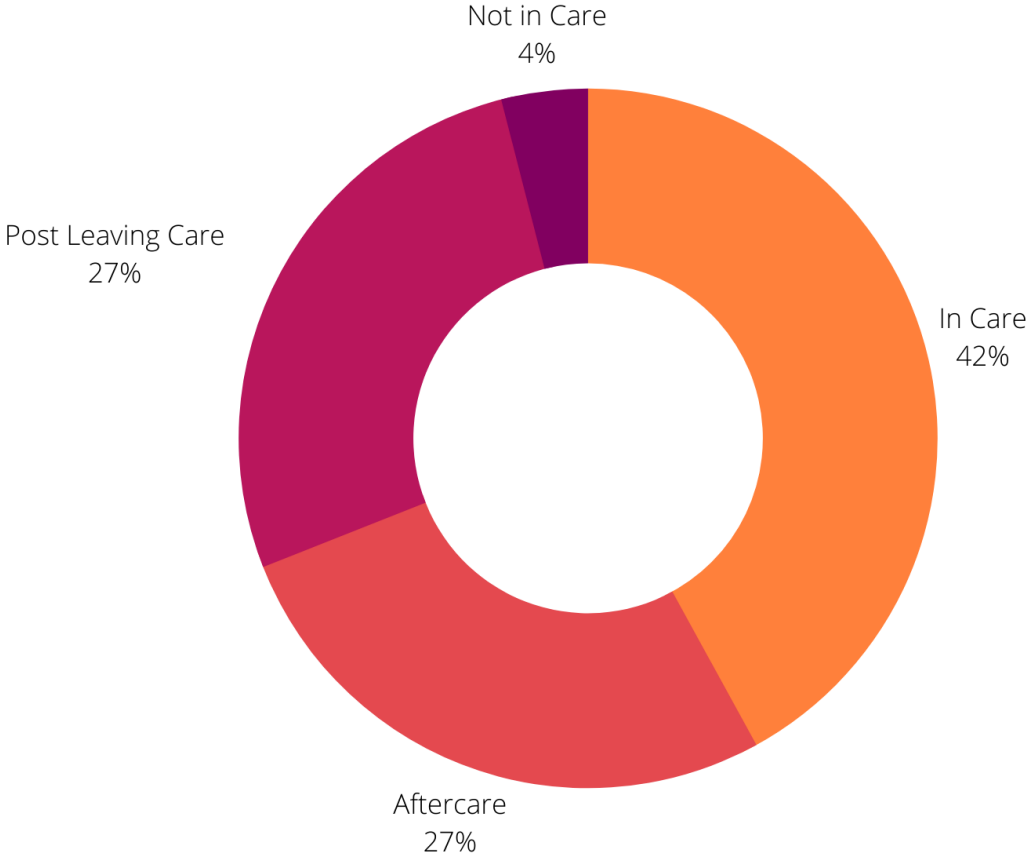
## Duration of Advocacy cases

Almost one in ten cases lasted for more than one year.





## Care status of children and young people referred to EPIC's advocacy service

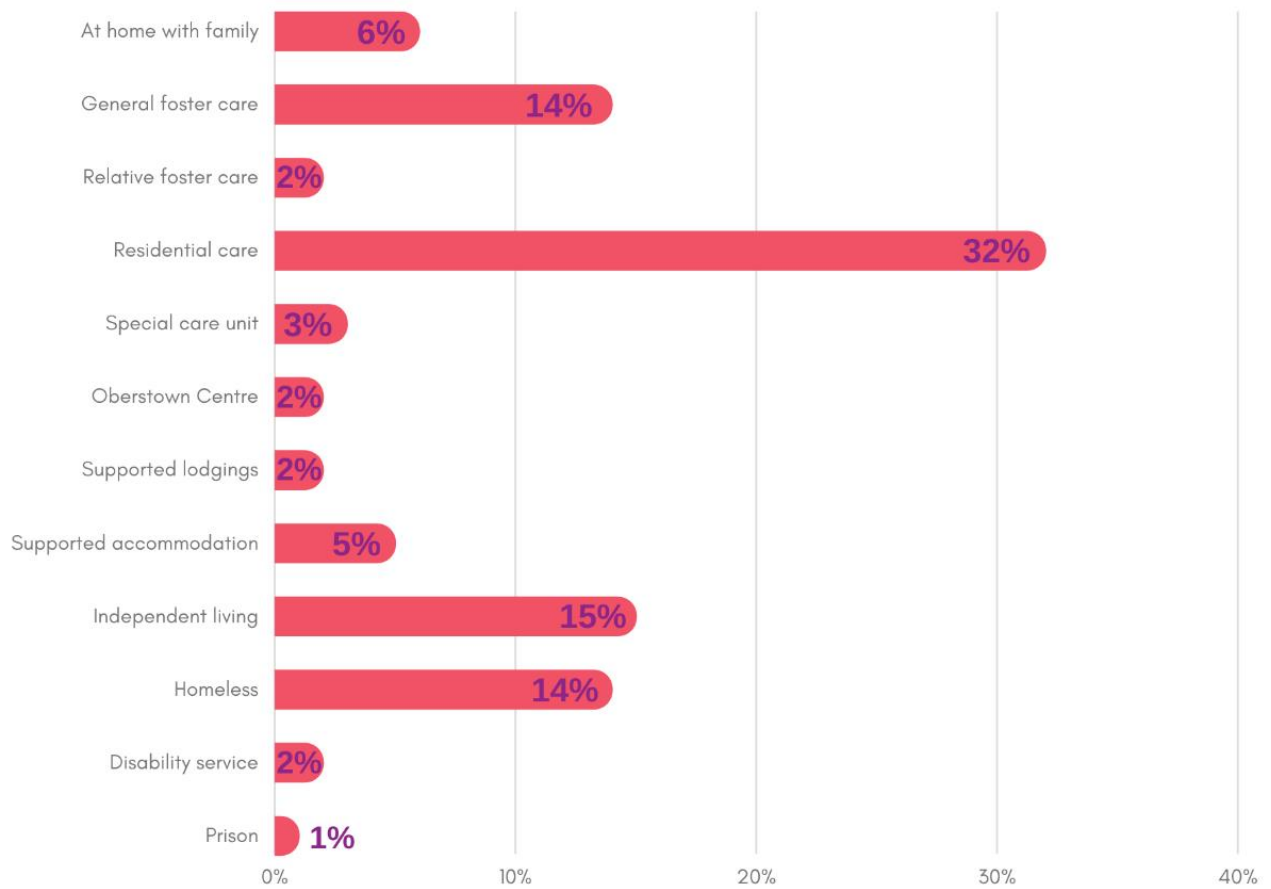


**Note:** Post Leaving Care in some cases starts at 17yrs old and can include children and young people who returned home, did not engage in aftercare, or who are 23+.





## Care Placement



This chart presents the type of care placement or living circumstances of children and young people on a case-by-case basis. During 2020, advocacy cases opened were mostly with children and young people in residential care, foster care, independent living, and homelessness<sup>4</sup>.

62 children and young people who were homeless engaged with EPIC's services in 2020 and Advocates working on a total of 34 cases where homelessness was the main presenting issue. In addition to this, further analysis showed an additional 89 cases involved children or young people who were homeless but had an advocacy case with a different presenting issue. Sadly, the Advocacy Service data for 2020 shows that the number of cases involving homeless children and young people has increased again, with 17 cases involving 16- and 17-year-olds.

Compared to the previous year, the percentage of cases involving children and young people in residential care increased from 25% to 32% in 2020.

<sup>4</sup> 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.







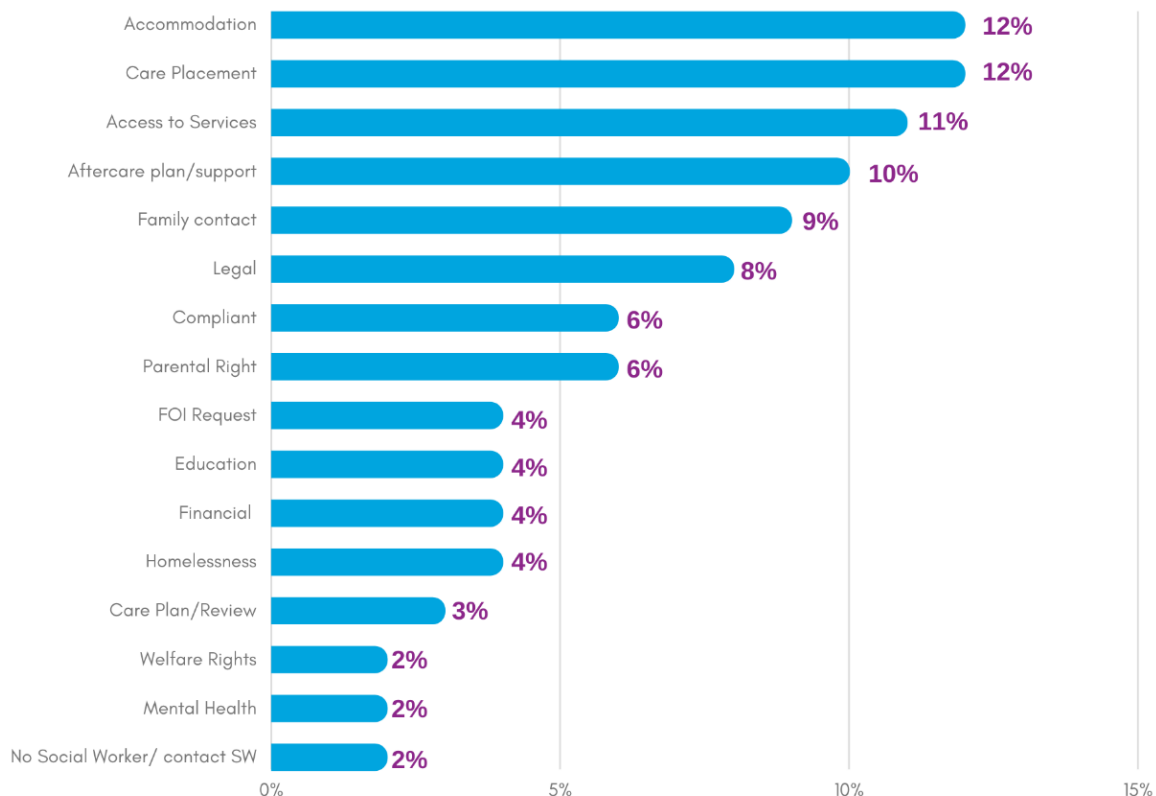
## Main Presenting Issues

Advocacy cases record the main presenting issue that resulted in a child or young person seeking advocacy support from EPIC. This chart outlines the presenting issues at the start date of cases opened in 2020. Many advocacy cases involved complex issues which may only emerge 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.<sup>5</sup>

The top five main presenting issues in 2020 were:

1. Accommodation
2. Care placement
3. Access to services
4. Aftercare plan/support
5. Family contact

In 2020, almost one in five of all advocacy cases involved accommodation issues, demonstrating the increasing difficulties that young people with a care background are having in relation to finding and securing appropriate accommodation to meet their needs.

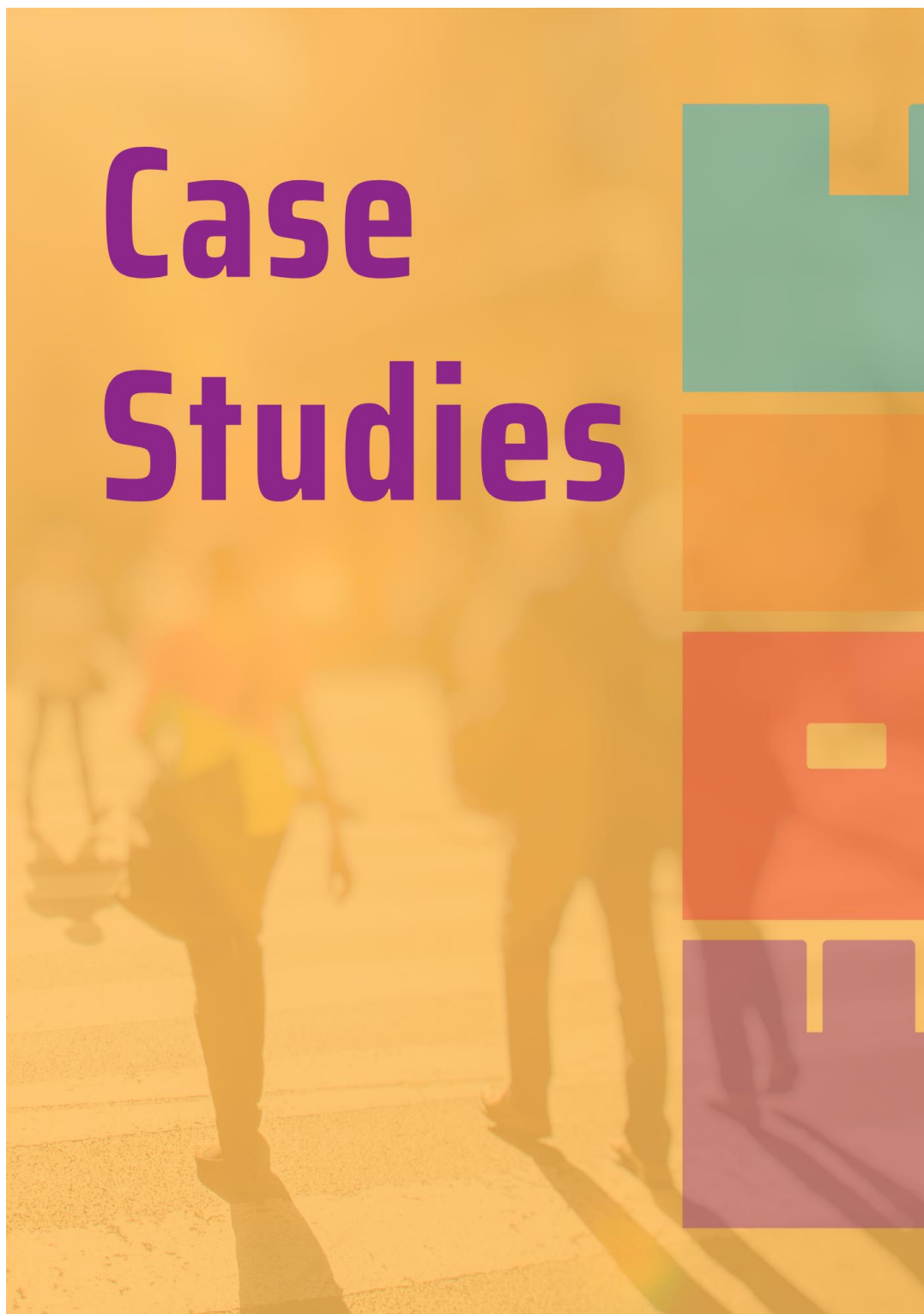


<sup>5</sup> It is acknowledged that this could have had an impact on the interpretation of the findings reported in Chart 10. For example, mental health is recorded as the main presenting issue for just 2% (21) of Advocacy cases in 2020. However, this is not to say that mental health issues did not arise in other cases, but rather it was the key presenting issue for these cases.





# Case Studies



**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, all names have been changed along with other identifying information including gender, age, geographical location, family background and care history details.





## Sarah | Accommodation

### Background

Sarah is 20 years old and was living with her former foster mother in the Western region. However, she was unable to remain living in her foster home and contacted EPIC for support around accommodation. The case lasted for six and a half months.

### Main presenting issues

1. Sarah was looking for help to find accommodation and information on how to put her name on the housing list.
2. Sarah was not engaged in education but was hoping to start a course in September.
3. Sarah had no allocated Aftercare Worker.

### Key actions Sarah's EPIC Advocate took

1. Helped Sarah to understand her housing rights and spoke to her former foster mother about the accommodation issues facing young people at present.
2. Assisted Sarah to access an education course.
3. Advocated on behalf of Sarah to the local social work team for her aftercare allowance to continue after re-engaging in education.
4. Gave information to Sarah about renting and the Housing Assistance Payment.
5. Continued to link in with Sarah by phone and text to provide information and support as needed.

### Outcome

Sarah re-engaged in education and was able to receive the aftercare allowance and felt positive about the outcome.







## Adam | Care placement

### Background

Adam is 15 years old and has been living in foster care for the last year. He is currently placed in the Southern region and is looking for support following a recent change of foster care placement. The case lasted for two months.

### Main presenting issues

1. Adam would like to return to his previous foster care placement as his brother is still there.
2. Adam changed school after moving placement and is upset that he cannot see his old school friends. He is having difficulty making friends in his new school.
3. Adam does not understand why he cannot return to his previous placement and wants to have his voice heard.

### Key actions Adam's EPIC Advocate took

1. Contacted Adam to discuss his concerns.
2. Helped Adam to write a letter to his Social Worker stating the key issues that were important to him.
3. Met with Adam to discuss the Social Worker's response to his letter. Had follow up contact with Adam to see how he was getting on in his new placement.

### Outcome

Adam accepted the reasons for his placement move. It was a fairly positive outcome as he felt his concerns were addressed and he now understood the decision was made in his best interest.





## Emma | Aftercare plan/support

### Background

Emma is 17 years old and was placed in homeless accommodation in the Dublin area under Section 5. She contacted EPIC to seek support with her accommodation, return to education and access appropriate services. The case lasted for nearly six months.

### Main presenting issues

1. Emma was worried about where she would live and felt nervous staying in homeless accommodation.
2. She was hoping to return to education and take the Leaving Certificate exam.
3. She experienced trauma as a child and was also looking for help to improve her mental health and well-being.

### Key actions Emma's EPIC Advocate took

1. Arranged to meet Emma by Zoom and discuss her support needs.
2. Helped Emma to write a letter that highlighted her concerns.
3. Met with statutory agencies to see what supports were available to Emma as she was not entitled to aftercare support.
4. Obtained legal advice to establish what services Emma might be entitled to.
5. Helped Emma to apply for supported accommodation and attended meetings with social work professionals.

### Outcome

Emma moved into a supported accommodation placement. She started a Youthreach course and was able to access therapeutic supports. The outcome was very positive.





## Sean | Access to services

### Background

Sean is 20 years old and has been in foster care for the last seven years. He is currently living with his former carer in the Western region and is receiving aftercare support. Contact was made with EPIC by his Guardian ad Litem. Sean agreed to engage with EPIC. The case is still open and has been active for almost one year.

### Main presenting issues

1. Sean was seeking a psychological assessment after experiencing mental health difficulties during his childhood.
2. He was hoping to engage in education after experiencing disrupted schooling earlier in his life.

### Key actions Sean's EPIC Advocate took

1. Spoke to Sean about his concerns and what services he was hoping to access.
2. Contacted his Guardian ad Litem and former foster carer to establish how EPIC could help Sean.
3. Supported Sean at assessment meetings with the psychologist.

### Outcome

A report was completed by the psychologist and engagement with aftercare is on-going. The outcome was very positive for Sean as his concerns were addressed.







## Shauna | Family contact

### Background

Shauna is 20 years old and is living in the Southern region. She was in residential care for over 10 years and lost contact with her siblings. She is currently receiving aftercare support. The case continued for 10 months.

### Main presenting issues

1. Shauna was looking to see her two younger brothers and her sister, whom she has not seen for five years.
2. She was upset that it was taking so long to make any progress and sought EPIC's help to have her voice heard.
3. She was also experiencing some personal difficulties during the Covid restrictions.

### Key actions Shauna's EPIC Advocate took

1. Met Shauna and discussed her concerns around family contact.
2. Arranged a meeting with Shauna and her Aftercare Worker.
3. Contacted the Social Workers of Shauna's siblings to establish if visits might be possible.
4. Linked Shauna in with one of her sibling's Social Workers to follow this up further.

### Outcome

Shauna decided to follow up family contact with one of her sibling's Social Workers herself. Her concerns were addressed and this was a positive outcome.







## Conclusion

2020 was a year of significant difficulty for all children and young people in Ireland due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Care-experienced children and young people faced additional challenges in relation to accommodation, care placements, access to services, after-care plans and contact with their families. It is notable that while EPIC's advocacy caseload did not jump significantly in 2020, the number of cases opened *per* child or young person did – reflecting the complexity of their situations, the uncertainty they experienced, and their concerns for the future.

It must also be recognised that when children and young people open multiple cases, it reflects a level of satisfaction with the service provided by EPIC, and their confidence that independent advocacy support will help them resolve their issues. EPIC is committed to ensuring that in the coming years, we continue to build and improve our Advocacy Service and our collaboration with others to meet the best interests of the child.

We believe that the learning accrued throughout the 2020 pandemic response should inform future emergency planning in the care system, and that the voices and experiences of children and young people in care and after care must be at the centre. EPIC stands ready to assist, as well as to support our partners in this regard.

## Afterword

Throughout the period of this report, EPIC observed care-experienced children and young people in challenging circumstances acting with courage and resilience, often accepting the harsh realities of life in lockdown with empathy and concern for others.

We also saw professionals across the statutory and voluntary sectors come together and go to extraordinary lengths to support care-experienced children and young people in an extremely difficult environment.

This included our own Advocacy Team and the Operations Team supporting them. Thank You.

