

2. Improved transition support must be provided as care experienced young people become adults

Around 200 young people in Northern Ireland leave care each year with 60% of these young people having spent more than five years in care and the average length of time spent in care being seven years and four months.¹⁸ Young people leaving care are forced to experience the transition to independent living, and the many challenges and responsibilities associated with this, several years before the average age of 22 years when other young people choose to leave their family homes.

The experience of negotiating independence, and the ability to do this successfully, is also frequently negatively impacted by young people's experiences of life before care and while in care. In light of these issues, it is unsurprising that care leavers frequently experience further disadvantage in the months and years following their departure from care. This reflects research findings that identify a clear relationship between the resilience of young people post care and the care and support received while in care, during the transition period and after leaving care.¹⁹

The provisions of recent legislation which strengthen the duties of statutory authorities in relation to young people leaving care and initiatives, such as, the Going the Extra Mile scheme which enables young people to stay with foster carers up to the age of 21 years, reflect a growing commitment to addressing this issue. The availability of such support however, must also be extended to young people in residential and other care settings and resources for this and related provision, such as, supported living, must be protected in the current economic climate.

Duty bearers: DHSSPS, DSD

3. Children's participation must be central to care planning

The Committee has noted its disappointment at "the fact that children are often not heard in separation and placement processes" when it is these decisions which so significantly impact on their lives. The absence of children's active involvement in these processes sits uneasily with findings which suggest their participation can be influential in ensuring the success of placements and in developing their sense of permanency.²⁰

While the legislative and policy frameworks for looked after children in Northern Ireland acknowledge the importance of hearing the views and voices of care experienced children, a number of studies reveal ongoing dissatisfaction with the ways and degree to which children are involved in decisions about both their care and other aspects of their lives.²¹

NICCY's 2006 review of care planning documented that while there were clear examples of good practice, progress was still needed to deliver genuinely participative practice to all care experienced children.²² The review noted that actions, such as, securing continuity of care and relationships for children, modifying the format and communication style of meetings and having an independent advocate for children would lead to a more child centred practice.

We welcome current Government initiatives in this area and believe that reviewing the structures for care planning would provide an opportunity to reform the process and ensure children could be more effectively engaged. In turn, the emerging practice of independent advocacy for care experienced children can be viewed as an effective mechanism for facilitating the views and voices of children, although to have enduring impact this should become a mandatory requirement.

Duty bearer: DHSSPS

