

THE KEY ISSU

Care experienced children are not a homogenous group – they come from different experiences both before and while being in care. Yet they face many disadvantages, often in absence of adequate support or provision.

At the end of March 2009 2,463 children and young people in Northern Ireland were 'looked after' by Social Services.³ This may be for a wide variety of reasons, including experiences of abuse and harm, family bereavement and breakdown and the need for care beyond the capacity of parents. The arrangements which lead to children becoming looked after can vary from voluntary agreements with parents through to the granting of court orders following lengthy and difficult proceedings involving a range of statutory agencies and professionals.

Alternatives to family life

Children who enter the care system can be placed in kinship care (with relatives or close family friends), foster or residential care or may be accommodated in special schools, hospitals, secure care or supported living settings. While some children will return home after a short period of care, others will have recurrent periods of being in care and still others will remain looked after on a long term basis.

The decision to remove a child from his or her family environment is, arguably the most far reaching intervention the State can make in children's lives. When this occurs, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (The Committee) is clear that placements, particularly those that are long term, must meet children's needs "not only for survival, but also for development, including psychological, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, in a manner compatible with human dignity and to prepare the child for individual life in a free society".⁴ In contrast to this, the limited nature of available placements has led to concerns that

placement decisions are driven by resourcing issues rather than by children's needs.⁵

The Committee has also stated its preference for alternative care arrangements, such as kinship care, which aim to provide a family type environment for children. While the majority of children are placed in kinship or foster care settings, it is important to recognise that children's experiences of such placements are not unproblematic, seen for instance, in the impact of changes and breakdowns in placements on their experiences of stability and permanency.⁶

In turning to residential care, young people have identified a series of difficulties and frustrations with this, such as, the absence of private space, conflict with peers, problematic relationships between children and staff, concerns about the use of discipline and restraint and the ineffectiveness of complaints procedures.⁷

The wellbeing of care experienced children and young people

The unacceptable outcomes for care experienced children can be seen, for example, in recent figures which document that 48% of looked after young people leave school without gaining qualifications compared to just 3% of all school leavers.⁸ In considering care experienced children's emotional health and wellbeing it has been well established that they experience markedly higher rates of mental health problems than others and "often face complex and enduring interpersonal and mental health problems affecting every aspect of their lives".⁹

The factors influencing this can relate both to children's experiences prior to entering care and the actual experience of being taken into care with