

different backgrounds and have many common challenges and

the emotional complexities associated with this. This may include feelings of confusion, abandonment, loss of family, geographical uprooting and lack of involvement in, or understanding of, the process. However, children and young people's consequent experiences of living in care can also negatively impact upon their wellbeing. For instance, the experience of living in an artificial environment, difficulties with family contact and, in some cases, lack of effective access to services to support their needs in areas, such as, education and health may all contribute to poor mental health.¹⁰

Concern has been expressed that processes, such as care planning and Looked After Children Reviews, fail to adequately consider and respond to children's emotional needs.¹¹ Commentators have noted the importance of investing in areas, such as, developing resilience and coping skills among care experienced children and recognising the emotional impact of issues, such as, continuity of care and family contact if this is to be rectified. In turn, structural difficulties including poor coordination between social services and other agencies like Child and Adolescence Mental Health Services must also be addressed.¹²

The vulnerability of children living without parental care means they are particularly exposed to failures by Government to safeguard their rights and best interests. While the development of a strategic approach to addressing these issues in Care Matters is to be welcomed, the absence of a published final strategy or implementation plan raises concerns that the full range of rights and protections of the UNCRC will remain elusive for many care experienced children and young people in Northern Ireland.

1. Greater continuity of care for children and young people must be ensured

The issues of placement stability and continuity of care are raised time and time again when care experienced children and young people are given the opportunity to comment on their experience of care, as something that is both important to them and frequently missing in their lives.¹³ In the March 2009/10 period concerns relating specifically to placements were the single biggest issue for young people using the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) Advocacy Service.¹⁴

The importance of stability in the lives of children who come into contact with the care system is strongly articulated by The Committee which encourages States to "invest in and support forms of alternative care that can ensure security, continuity of care and affection and the opportunity... to form long-term attachments based on mutual trust and respect".¹⁵ In contrast however, more than one in five children who have been looked after for more than one year experience at least one placement change.¹⁶

Yet concerns about continuity of care must look beyond issues of the appropriateness and consistency of placements to encompass children's experiences of social workers and other professional relationships. The protective influence of stability in care experienced children's lives extends to supporting them to develop and maintain ongoing relationships with the adults who are involved in their care and decisions about their welfare. Indeed, research shows how "worker consistency and continuity were deemed critical for young people who were coming from very unstable familial or care backgrounds".¹⁷

To date many care experienced children have been unable to access such consistency in their lives.

Duty bearer: DHSSPS