

2013



voice of young people in care

Our Life in Care

VOYPIC's third CASI survey of the views and experiences of children and young people in care



ISBN 978-0-9553454-5-6

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful:

- To all of the children and young people who took the time to complete the survey and for their thoughtfulness and honesty in sharing their views and experiences. The responsibility is now on each of us working in support of children and young people to listen and learn, to change what needs to be changed and to do more of what's working well
- To VOYPIC's Working Together for Change trainees and Kathy who helped plan and make the young people's report
- To the foster carers, social workers and children's home staff who promoted the survey and encouraged children and young people's participation
- To the members of the Our Life in Care advisory group
- To everyone at VOYPIC who worked on and helped with the survey
- To our funder on this project, The Atlantic Philanthropies and to our sponsor, DHSSPS

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Glossary

CASI	Computer Assisted Self Interviewing
CiNI	Children in Northern Ireland
DENI	Department of Education Northern Ireland
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HSCB	Health and Social Care Board
HSCT	Health and Social Care Trust
LAC	Looked after children
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OFMDFM	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
OLC	Our Life in Care
ORECNI	Office of Research Ethics Committees Northern Ireland
PA	Personal Adviser
PEP	Personal Education Plan
PHA	Public Health Agency
SBNI	Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
VOYPIC	Voice of Young People in Care



Foreword

Phew! Here we are, three years later, 333 children and young people strong and we've reached the end of our pilot CASI survey of children in care. We launched the survey with the bold aim of establishing a child friendly way to let young people share their views and experiences. Well, it worked and young people took this chance and are clear about what they believe. One young woman sets us straight on the issue of relationships with social workers -

... there needs to be a change, I know people can change jobs and want to do different things, but there needs to be more permanent social workers working with children and young people...

Female, 17

We appreciate how honest and generous they have been with their contributions, hopeful, no doubt, that this would bring about change and improvement for themselves and for those coming after them. It's our intention to use this frank and insightful information to acknowledge what's working well and raise awareness of the shortcomings in the system and press for improvement and change.

Over the course of the three surveys we have built a picture of what life in care is like for some children and young people. Two issues have emerged that warrant most attention – care planning and relationships.

We know that, amongst this group, not all have the best understanding of the plans made for their care and some don't agree with the decisions made about and for them. We know that they experience and have to cope with a lot of change in their lives – change in where and who they live with and change in the social workers appointed to support them. These are the fundamental issues that need to be addressed in all the current reviews about process and practice as well as the developments in legislation and policy.

For the third year in a row, there is plenty to celebrate. There is no shortage of ambitions, dreams and goals and their energy and hopefulness comes through loud and clear. Most children and young people are enjoying trusting and supportive relationships and can get help when they need it most. This group is doing



well at school and in their local communities responding to support from family, carers and friends.

But the reality and challenge of growing up in care is still facing us as we read of the experience of this group and what it's really like for them. While we may have the system, the structures and the policy in place, it's the everyday practice and fine detail that impact on daily life for these children. Read on and you'll get a sense of this in children's own words and phrases. We need to get it right, every time, all of the time for every child and young person being looked after away from home.

Our pilot project is now complete. It remains our vision that a CASI survey will become a regular and routine part of the care system in each HSC Trust. It still has the potential to show us what's working and what we might do to make sure it works well all the time.

So, three years later, 333 children and young people and just three quotes can sum up the hopes, dreams and ambitions of young people in care in Northern Ireland.

Vivian McConvey

Chief Executive Officer, VOYPIC

**Support, friendship,
love and care**

Female, 2011

**To be happy with my life,
have a family, friends,
nice things and a job
that I enjoy and want to
do for the rest of my life**

Male, 2012

**To feel safe, to get on with the family
you are living with, to feel cared for
and loved, to feel part of a family
and being included, to live a life
like a child that is not in care**

Female, 2013

1.0 Executive Summary

VOYPIC introduced Our Life in Care (OLC) - a Computer Assisted Self Interview or CASI survey – as a three year pilot project to collect the views and experiences of children in care aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland. Our first survey was completed in 2011, followed by a second survey in 2012 and finally the third survey in 2013.

This pilot was the first time the majority of children in care in Northern Ireland were invited to share their views and experiences within a defined period of time. Since 2011, 333 children and young people took this opportunity giving us a valuable insight into how the system of care is working from their perspective. Here are the key things we have learned from these young people.

What is most important

Contact with family and friends remains the issue of most importance to young people. The practical issue of having access to the internet in children's homes was raised for the purpose of education as well as leisure.

Living in safety with stability

Most young people had enjoyed stability in their placement in the previous year. For some young people, however, there are multiple placement moves within a short period of time.

Health

When it comes to health, the experience of young people in care does not differ much from that of the general population of young people. They do, however, seem to worry to a significant degree about their health.



Enjoying, learning, achieving

Most young people are active in education. Getting more support to attend regularly or return to school after absence remains an issue. This is of particular concern for young people living in children's homes.

Contributing positively to community and society

Most young people are getting on well with friends, at school and in their local communities. Staying in touch after moving to a new placement remains a challenge for some.

Living in society which respects rights

Young people's understanding of the plans for their care remains lower than it should be given the significance of care planning in their lives. Furthermore, some young people have to cope with the challenge of changing social workers.

2.0 Survey demographics

2.1 Who took part in Our Life in Care?

On the 31 March 2013 there were 2,807 children in care in Northern Ireland.

We invited 1,241 children in care to take part in Our Life in Care 2013 and 105 of them completed it - a response rate of 8.5%.

Children and young people who completed the previous surveys were invited to take part again. Nineteen of them re-completed the survey in 2012 and 34 in 2013. Only four young people completed all three surveys.

A total of 333 individual children and young people have taken part in the survey since 2011.

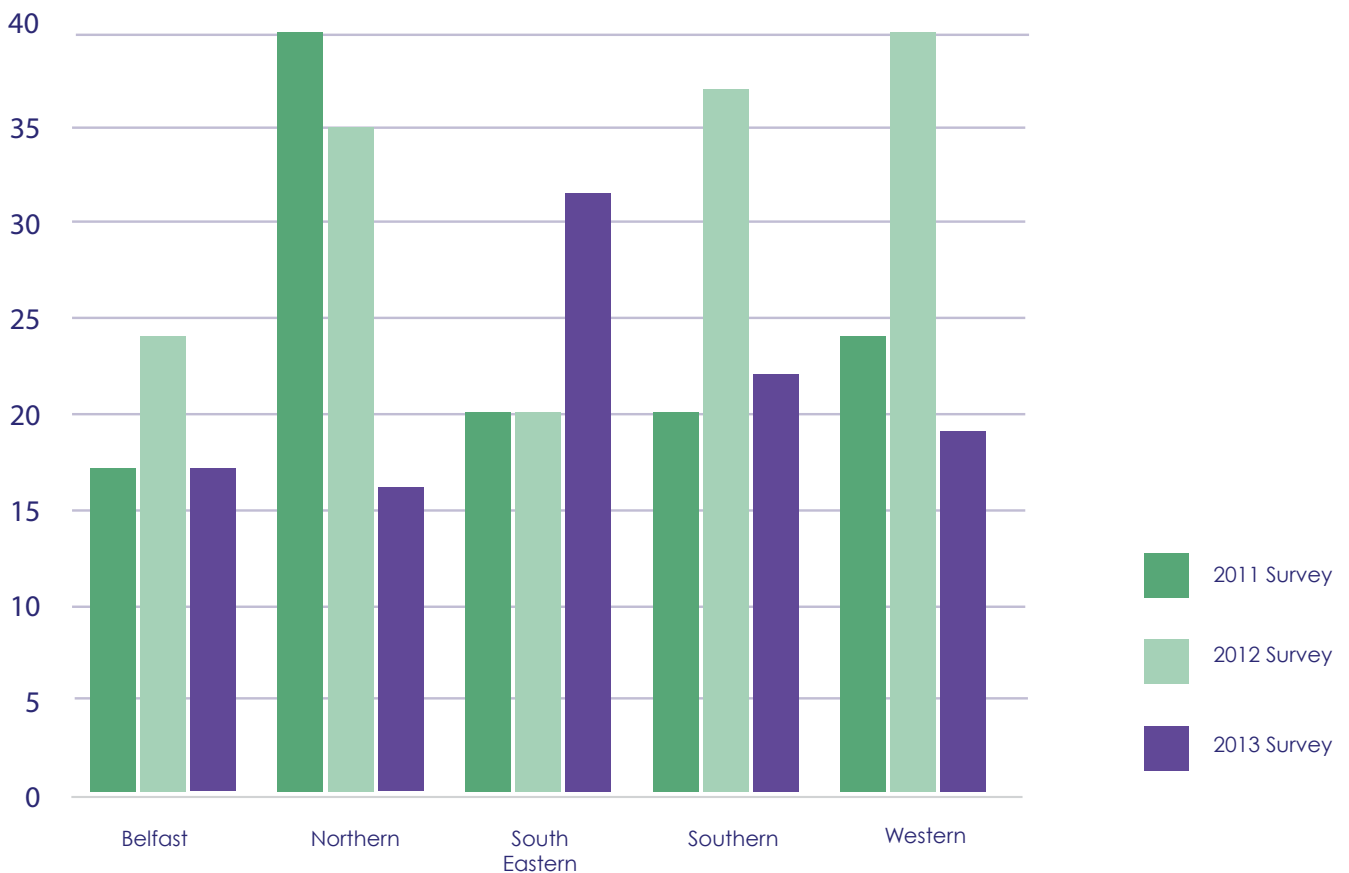


Figure 1. Surveys by HSC Trust and year

2.2 Locality

The 105 participants of the 2013 survey come from all five HSC Trusts. At 31 March 2013, 24% of children in care were within the Belfast Trust, 25% in the Northern Trust, 18% in South Eastern Trust, 16% in Southern Trust and 17% were in the Western Trust (The Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2012/13).

Over the three years from 2011 to 2013, 382 surveys were completed.

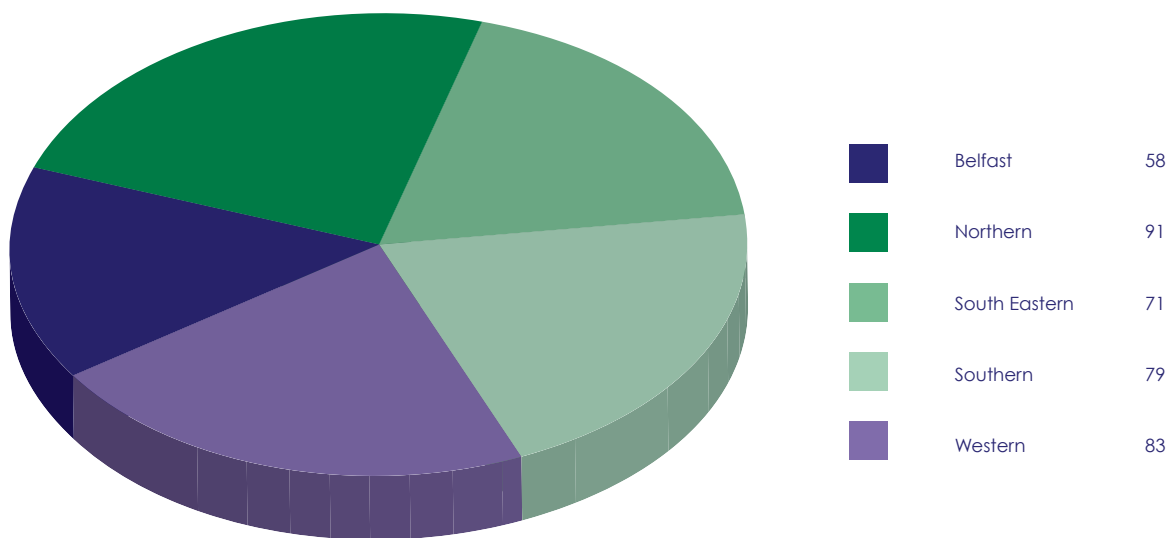


Figure 2. Total (382) surveys by HSC Trust 2011- 2013

2.3 Age

Of the 2,807 children and young people in care, 19% were aged 1 to 4, 31% were aged 5 to 11, 27% were aged 12 to 15, and 18% were aged 16 and over.

In the OLC 2013 survey 26% were aged 8 to 11, almost a third (31%) were aged 16 and over and 44% were aged 12 to 15. When we look at the overall number of survey participants by age across all three surveys, the highest percentage are in the 12-15 age group.

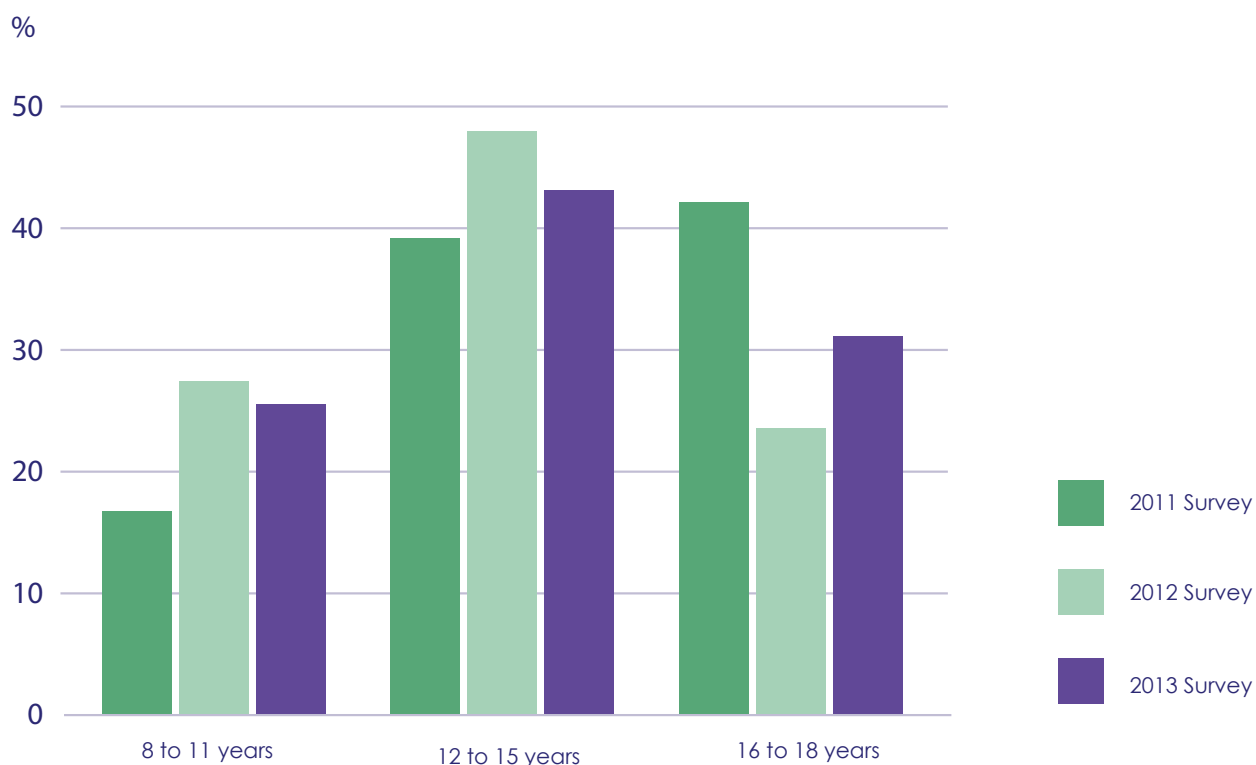
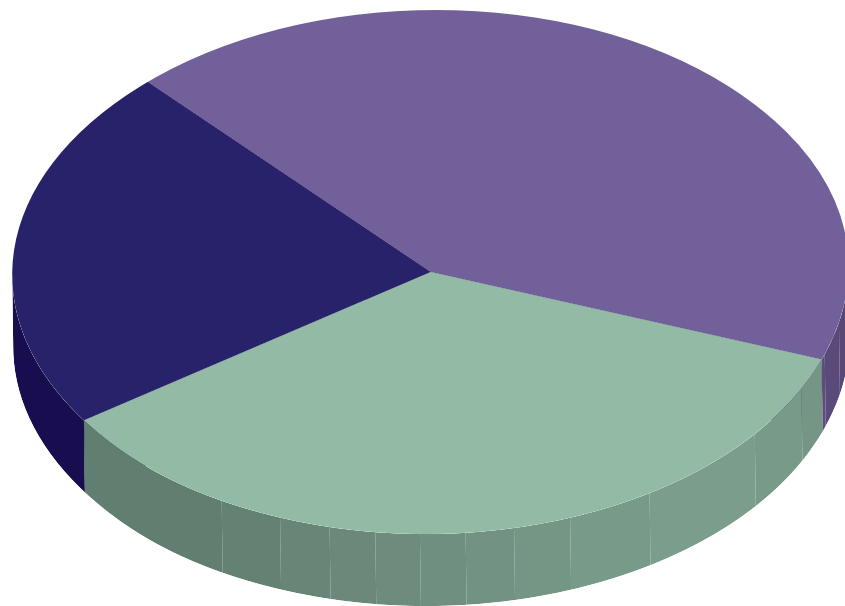


Figure 3. Surveys by age and year



8 to 11 years 24% 12 to 15 years 45% 16 to 18 years 31%

Figure 4. Total surveys by age 2011- 2013

2.4 Placement

At the 31 March 2013, 75% of all children and young people in care were living in foster care (39% in non-relative foster care, 31% in kinship foster care and 5% living in independent provider placements), 8% in residential care, 12% were living at home and 5% were listed as other.

In the OLC survey 68% of participants were living in foster care (53% in non-relative foster care and 15% in kinship foster care), 24% were living

in residential care, 3% were in care at home, 3% semi-supported and 2% were living in other placement types.

The highest level of participation by placement type across all three surveys was children and young people living in foster care (non-relative and kinship foster care). This is representative of the overall looked after population.

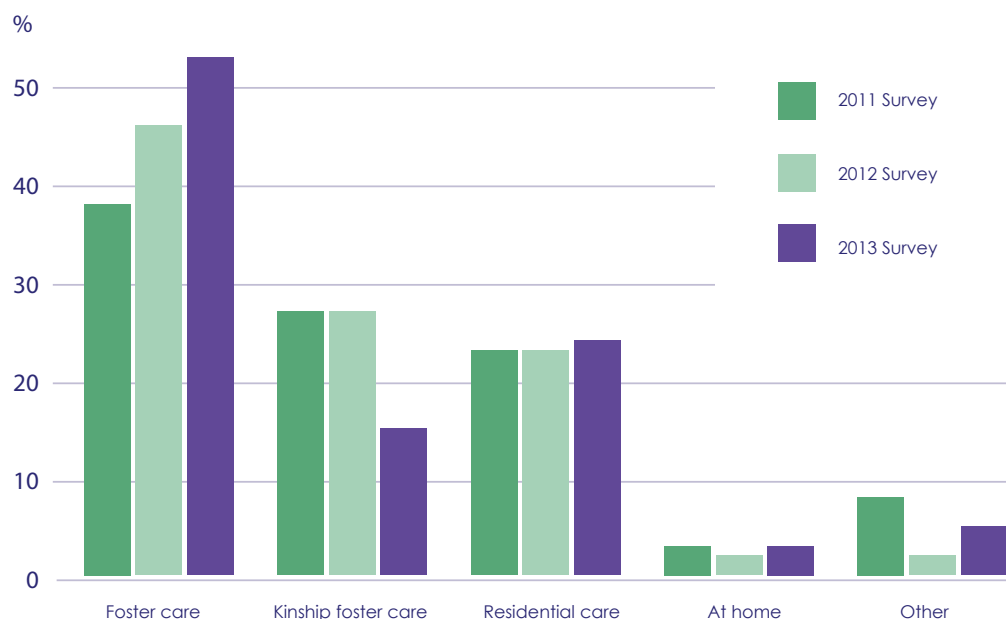


Figure 5. Surveys by placement type and year

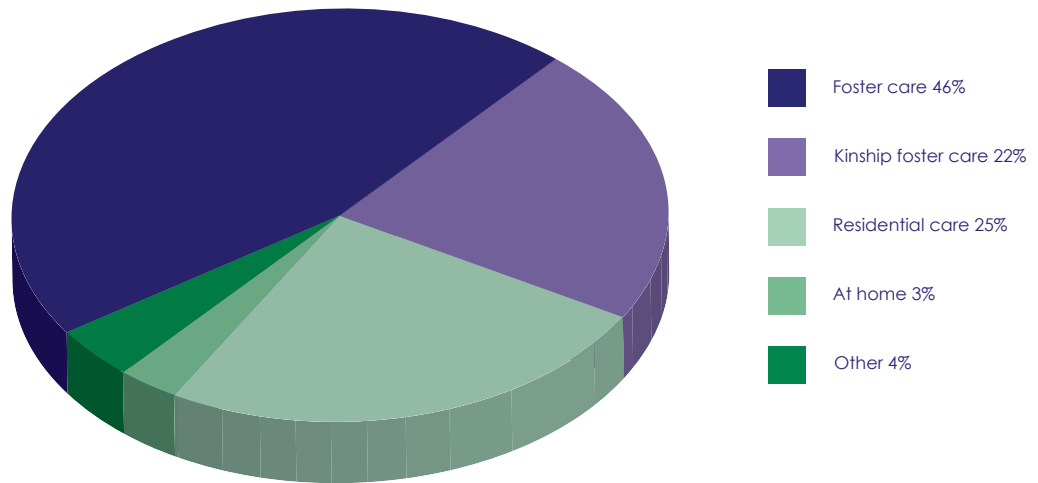


Figure 6. Total surveys by placement type 2011 - 2013

2.5 Gender, ethnicity and nationality

More girls (55%) than boys (45%) responded to OLC in 2013. At 31 March 2013 48% of all children in care were girls and 52% were boys. This is similar to the Young Life & Times Survey 2013 where 57% of respondents were female and 43% were male. Since 2011, the number of males responding to the OLC survey has continued to decrease.

There has been little change in the ethnic profile of survey participants since 2012. In 2013, 93% were white, 3% identified themselves as having a mixed background and 4% were black.

On nationality, the majority (55%) were British, 35% were Irish and 10% selected other

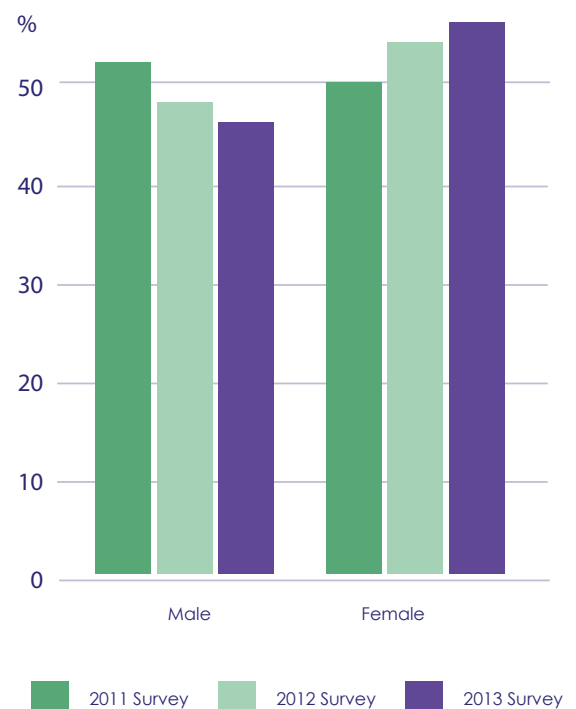


Figure 7. Surveys by gender and year

2.6 Religion

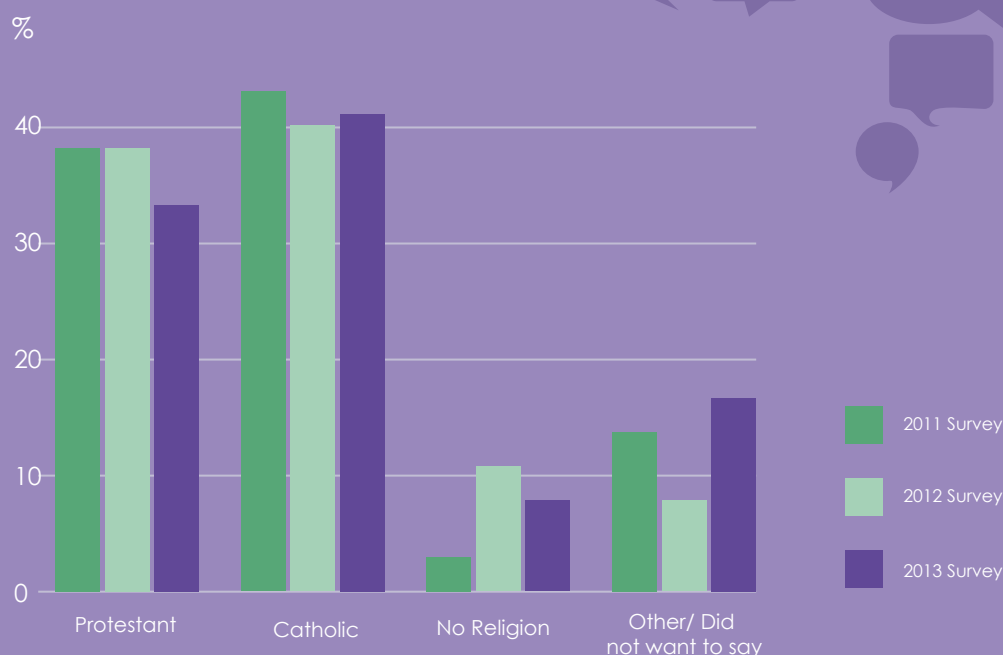


Figure 8. Surveys by religion and year

In the 2013 survey, the majority (42%) were Catholic and 34% were Protestant. The remainder selected no religion (8%), 6% selected other and a combined 11% did not want to say or did not know.

The Delegated Statutory Functions Statistical Report (31 March 2013) reflects that 47% of the total care population in Northern Ireland were Catholic, 29% were Protestant, 13% were other Christian/other, 5% had no religion and the religion of 5% was unknown.

The most significant change in the religious profile of OLC participants since 2011 is the proportion that selected “other”, “did not want to say” or “did not know”. This has doubled from only 5% in the 2012 survey to 11% in 2013. This echoes the Young Life & Times Survey where just over a quarter (26%) of respondents said they did not belong to a particular religion.

3.0 What we found out from Our Life in Care

Our Life in Care summarises the views and experiences of children and young people in care on the key issues of most importance to them and on the six high level outcomes in the OFMDFM Children's Strategy.

3.1 Most important issues

As in the previous surveys, key issues were about contact and placement as well as being listened to and having your voice heard. Education, support, safety and stability also featured.



Figure 9. Most important issues for children and young people in care



Keeping in touch – making sense of contact

We know that regardless of the reasons for coming into care, many children and young people will want to return home and keep in touch with immediate and wider family. They need help to understand their own situation to fully benefit from contact with family and friends. The importance of contact is echoed across all three surveys.

Less than half (49%) of the 2013 survey participants were able to keep in touch with their family as much as they want. This is a decrease from 60% in 2012. When asked if their social worker helps with contact, almost three quarters (73%) said “yes completely” – a steady improvement over the three surveys.

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 56% can keep in touch with family as often as they want
- 64% said “yes completely” that their social worker helps them have contact with family
- 60% stay overnight with family and friends
- 85% of those who stay overnight are happy or very happy with arrangements
- 73% know enough about their family history
- 33% have enough of a life story book

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 60% can keep in touch with family as often as they want
- 65% said “yes completely” that their social worker helps them have contact with family
- 55% stay overnight with family and friends
- 93% of those who stay overnight are happy or very happy with arrangements
- 67% know enough about their family history
- 36% have enough of a life story book

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 49% can keep in touch with family as often as they want
- 73% said “yes completely” that their social worker helps them have contact with family
- 53% stay overnight with family and friends
- 100% of those who stay overnight are happy or very happy with arrangements
- 59% know enough about their family history
- 30% have enough of a life story book

Just over half (53%) in our survey are able to stay overnight with friends or family – a further decrease from the high of 60% in 2011. It is positive, however that 100% of those who have overnight contact are happy or very happy with this arrangement – up from 85% in 2011.

Knowing about family background and history can help with stability and feeling settled. We asked if children and young people knew enough about their own family stories. Over half (59%) think they know enough – a decrease from both previous surveys. In addition, on the question of a life story book, only 30% said they had enough – another drop from our 2012 survey.

Contact is a crucial issue for children in care and is a key feature in care planning. We still have a shortfall in research that was recognised in 2007 in Care Matters – a bridge to a better future. We need evidence on the effect and impact of contact and guidance on how to promote and support it.

Feeling safe, settled and secure

Children and young people in care should grow up in safe, stable and peaceful placements. They face the added challenge of living away from their own, immediate family unit. They should be protected from harm and exploitation in the interests of their health and well-being, positive self-esteem and educational attainment. We asked children and young people about how settled and safe they felt where they live.

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 90% have an adult they can trust
- 89% have an adult they can go to for help if they have a problem or are upset
- 72% feel settled where they live
- 80% feel safe where they live
- 90% feel safe in their neighbourhood
- 73% at school, college or training always get on well with others

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 96% have an adult they can trust
- 93% have an adult they can go to for help if they have a problem or are upset
- 79% feel settled where they live
- 86% feel safe where they live
- 92% feel safe in their neighbourhood
- 63% at school, college or training always get on well with others

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 88% have an adult they can trust
- 88% have an adult they can go to for help if they have a problem or are upset
- 79% feel settled where they live
- 83% feel safe where they live
- 95% feel safe in their neighbourhood
- 54% at school, college or training always get on well with others

Feeling at home can increase a sense of stability and permanence for all children in care. A strong theme throughout our recent consultation on minimum standards for children's homes was the desire to have a place to feel at home. A child who feels that it is truly their own home as opposed to a "placement" or "residential unit" is more likely to feel settled and form attachments and avoid placement breakdown. If these new minimum standards achieve what they have set out to do, we should see improved experiences for children and young people in children's homes in Northern Ireland.

It's reassuring to see that a steady, high number of participants are feeling both settled (79%), and safe where they live (83%). There is still the balance of children and young people however – as many as 21% - who do not feel settled and 17% who don't feel safe where they live.

Thinking about the wider community, the survey asked participants to record how safe they felt in their neighbourhood. A large majority (95%) reported feeling safe in their neighbourhood – an increase from previous years. These findings are similar to the 2010 Young People's Behaviour and Attitude survey which found that 94% of participants feel safe in the area they live.

When it comes to getting on well with others, only 54% at school, college or in training reported always getting on well with others – a drop from 73% in 2011.

We all have a responsibility to safeguard children and young people. We need to take action and coordinate support from a range of sources close to children to address risks to safety.

Other stuff that is important

Several participants commented on the lack of internet access in children's homes.

I think there should be Wi-Fi in children's homes so they can do their homework

Female, 13

Wi-Fi in children's homes so you can play online games with your mates

Male, 15

This issue was raised during our consultation on minimum standards in children's homes. As a result, internet access was included in the DHSSPS Minimum Standards for Children's Homes in April 2014.



children and young people should have access to the internet for school or college work, training programmes and leisure activities and where appropriate social networking





There were other issues raised by OLC participants who said it's important to:

- Be encouraged
- Have fun
- Feel safe
- Be cared for
- Be loved
- Get a good education

3.2 Living in society which respects rights

Promoting and fulfilling children's rights is an underlying principle and value to VOYPIC's work. Key survey questions focus on care planning, pathway planning and support for making the transition to adulthood.

To have their opinions heard and valued, no person wants their opinions discredited

Female, 15

Since the 1990s, much has changed for children and children's rights. The UNCRC was ratified by the UK Government in 1991 and came into force on 15 January 1992. Locally, the Children (NI) Order has been the principal statute governing the care and protection of children since 1996. Greater priority is placed on the care and protection of children and young people and the support provided for them. Advocacy and participation services play a key role in supporting children and young people to have their voices heard and their rights and entitlements upheld.

The role of corporate parent

The State is the corporate parent for looked after children with HSC Trusts taking a lead role in their care in Northern Ireland. Each HSC Trust is responsible for ensuring that children's needs are met through a care plan which is reviewed at least every six months at a looked after child or LAC review meeting.

There is no definition of the term "corporate parent" in the Children (NI) Order, however, in 2007 Care Matters in Northern Ireland – a bridge to a better future set out a view on the role of the corporate parent:



...when children enter care, social services, health and education providers assume a huge responsibility on behalf of society for their welfare and future well-being. Trusts and professionals who work with children in care should exercise their corporate parenting role responsibly to ensure the very best outcomes, the same outcomes they would wish and expect for their own children.



The social worker – the key support relationship

As children move into and through the care system, they are likely to be allocated social workers in different services and teams eg, family intervention, LAC teams and the 16+ service.

All 105 participants were asked how many social workers they have had since they came into care. Almost half (48.5%) reported having four or more. Just over two fifths (41%) of all under 12s and half of over 12s reported having four or more social workers since they came into care.

KEY FINDINGS 2013 UNDER 12s

- 41% have had four or more social workers since they came into care
- 85% see their current social worker once a month or more often

KEY FINDINGS 2013 OVER 12s

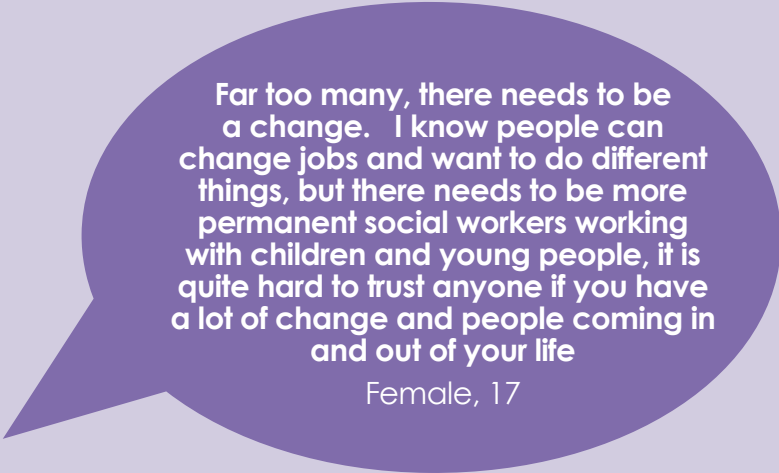
- 50% have had four or more social workers since they came into care
- 84% see their current social worker once a month or more often



**I think I've had 11
over the last
18 years**
Male, 18


We cross referenced the number of social workers young people had with how long they had been in care. For those under 12 in care for less than four years, 45% had four or more social workers. In the older age group, 44% had four or more social workers – a significant amount of change in such a short period of time.

This high level of change of social worker may jeopardise a child or young person's sense of feeling settled and stable, as one young woman described:



Far too many, there needs to be a change. I know people can change jobs and want to do different things, but there needs to be more permanent social workers working with children and young people, it is quite hard to trust anyone if you have a lot of change and people coming in and out of your life

Female, 17



This young woman reflects the impact that having multiple changes of social workers has had on her ability to trust people. We recognise the challenges that face social services, however we need to ask how much change is reasonable for a child or young person to cope with. If some level of change is unavoidable, the next question we must ask is how we are managing these transitions, not only between services eg LAC to 16+ services, but also between social workers.

There is a statutory duty on social workers to see children in care at least once a month. We asked all participants how often they see their current social worker and the majority of all participants (83%) reported seeing them once a month or more often. Regardless of how long they have been care, the majority in our survey are seeing their social worker once a month or more often. The remainder report seeing their social worker less frequently or didn't specify.

It's hard to imagine a more significant relationship in the life of a child in care than that with their social worker. They are the gatekeeper and enabler to so much for a child in care. The system underpinning this role would benefit from review to strengthen it and increase its positive impact. This relationship can provide stability which is achieved through open access and frequent contact between the child or young person and the social worker.

Listen to me, hear my voice

We asked participants aged 8 to 11 for their views and experiences of being listened to. They were asked if their social worker helps them to say what they think about being in care. They could choose to answer "yes a lot", "yes a bit", "not much" or "not at all". Over two thirds (68%) of under 12s told us that their social worker helps them to say what they think about being in care but only 54% said they can tell their social worker what's happening in their life.



KEY FINDINGS 2011 UNDER 12s

- 77% said their social worker helps them say what they think about being in care
- 48% can tell their social worker what is happening in their life
- 38% know what their care plan is

KEY FINDINGS 2012 UNDER 12s

- 73% said their social worker helps them to say what they think about being in care
- 49% can tell their social worker what is happening in their life
- 44% know what their care plan is

KEY FINDINGS 2013 UNDER 12s

- 68% said their social worker helps them to say what they think about being in care
- 54% can tell their social worker what is happening in their lives
- 61% know what their care plan is



Care plans and LAC review meetings are critical to decision making in young people's lives. An individual care plan which is discussed and agreed with a child is key to effective care and the foundation for pathway planning and the transition to adulthood. It is positive to note that there has been an increase from 38% in the 2011 survey to 61% in 2013 of under 12s who know what their care plan is.

I make all my decisions myself!

Male, 13

Social worker talks to me about it

Male, 10

KEY FINDINGS 2011 UNDER 12s

- 42% are able to tell adults what they think about being in care
- 52% say someone talks to them about their care plan

KEY FINDINGS 2012 UNDER 12s

- 58% are able to tell adults what they think about being in care
- 54% say someone talks to them about their care plan

KEY FINDINGS 2013 UNDER 12s

- 50% are able to tell adults what they think about being in care
- 39% say someone talks to them about their care plan

When we asked about who they can talk to about being in care and care planning, half (50%) of those aged 8 to 11 said they can tell an adult what they think about being in care. This leaves half of this age group feeling unable to do this or benefit from this support.

It is a concern that there has been a decrease from 54% in the 2012 survey to only 39% in 2013 of the youngest participants who said that someone had spoken to them about what was in their care plan.

A child or young person should know the overall plan for their time in care whether that's for a short or significant period of time. They may need support to be a part of the planning for their care and to participate meaningfully in decision making throughout their life in care and into adulthood.

I didn't know what care plan meant

Female, 10

KEY FINDINGS 2011 OVER 12s

- 40% know “completely” about the plans made for their care
- 36% “completely” agree with decisions made in their care plan
- 29% have a copy of their care plan

KEY FINDINGS 2012 OVER 12s

- 36% know “completely” about the plans made for their care
- 35% “completely” agree with decisions made in their care plan
- 31% have a copy of their care plan

KEY FINDINGS 2013 OVER 12s

- 37% know “completely” about the plans made for their care
- 29% “completely” agree with decisions made in their care plan
- 27% have a copy of their care plan

The overall picture this year is that 44% of all 105 participants told us they know “completely” about the plans made for their care.

The number of young people aged 12 and over who know “completely” remains disappointingly low at 37% as does the number who completely agree with decisions in their plan. Only 27% of over 12s reported that they have a copy of their care plan.

There may be explanations for why some children don't have a copy or summary of their plan but all children should have basic but clear understanding of the immediate and future plans for their care. It would not take a huge effort to ensure children and young people are clear in their knowledge about where they'll be living, going to school and keeping in touch. All of this would promote a sense of stability and safety.

We must meet the challenge of ensuring that children and young people are, and feel part of, decision making about their lives.

I'm not getting a choice if I'm going to fostering or not

Female, 15

Greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring children and young people have someone to support them to voice their views about being in care and what is in their care plan. A statutory right to independent advocacy would enhance the legal requirements laid down in the Children (NI) Order 1995 and could be achieved through the proposed Adoption and Children Bill.

It may be time to review the process and format of care planning, LAC reviews and consider more effective ways to help children and young people engage and identify with their own care plan. Should children and young people be able to access a version of their care plan electronically or should other formats be considered and developed?

Supporting young people leaving care

The Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002 outlines the services and entitlements for young people provided through a 16+ service in each HSC Trust. Depending on their legal status, young people have rights to a pathway plan, the appointment of a personal advisor (PA) and support from

social services until the age of 21 or 24 if still in education and training. The role of a PA is to provide support and guidance to young people as they grow and mature. The number of young people who say they can talk to their PA has increased on previous years but remains low at 44%.

KEY FINDINGS 2011 OVER 16s

- 39% can talk to their personal advisor about what's happening in their life
- 18% don't know "at all" about their pathway plan
- 35% have a copy of their pathway plan
- 31% completely agree with decisions from the pathway plan

KEY FINDINGS 2012 OVER 16s


- 35% can talk to their personal advisor about what's happening in their life
- 19% don't know "at all" about their pathway plan
- 24% have a copy of their pathway plan
- 24% completely agree with decisions from the pathway plan

KEY FINDINGS 2013 OVER 16s

- 44% can talk to their personal advisor about what's happening in their life
- 22% don't know "at all" about their pathway plan
- 16% have a copy of their pathway plan
- 31% completely agree with decisions from the pathway plan


In the HSCB Delegated Statutory Functions Statistical Report (31 March 2013) 226 young people were without a PA and 45 were without a pathway plan – fewer than in the previous year.

In OLC 2013, only 16% of young people had a copy of their pathway plan and less than a third (31%) said they completely agree with the decisions from the plan. Two contrasting experiences are reflected by these two young people –



I don't know what this is and I don't think I have one
Female, 16

I helped them come up with the plan
Male, 18



Regardless of their entitlement, young people may need support to make the transition from being in care to independence. We should find a way to provide appropriate support for all care experienced young people to move to independent living. A fully resourced and quality personal advisor service benefits care leavers regardless of their specific legal status. By supporting and encouraging a young person through this key transition, a PA or equivalent service helps prevent or minimise crises such as homelessness and unemployment and their impact.

All three surveys highlight the need to improve support for young people in transition. Across the UK there has been legislative and policy reform on support entitlements for young people in care. In England, the Children and Families Act 2014 makes a number of new provisions for care leavers. This includes the choice to stay with their foster families until their 21st birthday, known as “Staying Put” arrangements. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 introduces better permanence planning for looked after children. It will place a duty on local authorities to assess a care leaver's

request for assistance up to and including the age of 25. From 2015, it will give all 16 year olds in care the right to stay until the age of 21.

These reforms recognise the importance of extended support and eligibility for care leavers to help them successfully move to adulthood and independence. They give pause for thought for Northern Ireland policy makers about whether it is time to look at how we can better support young people leaving care here.

3.3 Health – the best possible start in life

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 40% worry about their health
- 17% need help to stop smoking
- 73% saw their dentist in the previous six months
- 76% saw their GP in the previous six months

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 44% worry about their health
- 12% need help to stop smoking
- 79% saw their dentist in the last six months
- 76% saw their GP in the previous six months

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 41% worry about their health
- 19% need help to stop smoking
- 73% saw their dentist in the last six months
- 73% saw their GP in the previous six months

If I don't eat healthy enough I might get bad health problems in the future

Female, 15

I worry that I'm going to grow up fat sometimes

Female, 12

We asked about general health and well-being and found that 41% of participants worry about their health – close to previous years' findings. Young people were asked to comment on what they worry about and, similar to previous findings, weight and emotional health remain the top concerns.

There were also concerns and comments about the health of families.

Although many worry about their health, 97% said they know enough to keep themselves healthy.

Concerns about emotional health were prevalent. Although we did not ask any direct questions about emotional health needs or access to mental health services, participants commented on their mental well-being.

Just worry about my weight but I know if I need help to lose it I will get it

Female, 18

I worry about heart problems in my family

Female, 13

I'm worried about the amount of drugs I'm abusing and the effects it is having on my life, being paranoid

Male, 16

Pregnancy scares and harming myself

Female, 17

The Young Life & Times Survey 2013 asked 16 year olds in Northern Ireland about emotional health. Just over one quarter (28%) of 16 year olds said that they had experienced serious personal, emotional or mental health problems at some point in the previous year. Yet only over one third of these respondents had sought professional help for these problems.

We look forward to results from OFMDFM and DHSSPS funded research studies into the physical and mental health of looked after children and young people in Northern Ireland. The findings from these ongoing studies should increase our knowledge and understanding of both the physical and mental health needs of children and young people in care and contribute to future planning and service provision.

Exploring personal views about health

We asked children and young people about aspects of health including diet and exercise. We also invited them to say how they feel about their health. There seems to be some change over the course of the surveys. Our findings are broadly similar to that of the general population.

There is an odd contrast between an increased majority in 2013 (84%) of participants who rate their diet as healthy, and the lower number (45%) of children and young people who are eating breakfast and exercising regularly (22%) which has dropped over the course of the three surveys.

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 75% rate their diet as healthy
- 16% eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- 51% have breakfast five or more days per week
- 40% exercise at least five days per week

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 82% rate their diet as healthy
- 16% eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- 61% have breakfast five or more days a week
- 36% exercise at least five days per week

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 84% rate their diet as healthy
- 13% eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- 45% have breakfast five times or more days a week
- 22% exercise at least five days per week

3.4 Enjoying, learning, achieving

Studying catering and I hope to go to university to do my diploma soon

Female, 18

I think kids should be encouraged to go to school because they're the future

Female, 18

There is a continued interest in redressing poor educational outcomes with more attention on developing strategies that promote learning and further and higher education. Personal Education Plans (PEPS) were introduced to Northern Ireland in 2011 and are gradually being developed for all children in care. We hope that PEPS will be comprehensive and inclusive of all the educational needs and plans for children in care.

The education of children and young people in care

In Northern Ireland 18% of care leavers aged 16 to 18 left school with five GCSEs (grades A*- C) in 2012/13, a decrease of 1% from the previous year. Amongst the general population of school leavers, however, 77% left with five GCSEs (grades A*- C) which highlights the gap in educational attainment between care experienced young people and their peers.

A very large majority (90%) of OLC participants were currently in education, training or employment giving us valuable insight into experiences of school and education. The over 12s answered a sliding scale

question about how much they enjoyed school. The majority (71%) of them have an average to high level of enjoyment at school, college or training – an increase from 62% in 2012 with 16% having a low or very low level of enjoyment. In the younger group aged 8 to 11, the majority (71%) said they enjoyed school “a bit” or “a lot” - a drop from 93% in the 2012 survey. Almost one third (29%) answered “not much” or “not at all”.

The 2013 ARK Kids' Life and Times Survey found that 81% of those in P7 enjoyed school. This gives us a useful snapshot of the levels of enjoyment in school for children aged 10 to 11 in the general population.

Some OLC participants commented on school:

I love school, I love doing my homework!

Female, 10

Only 90% because sometimes it can be stressful with all the work!

Female, 15

I have 100% attendance

Female, 16

Missing school, missing out

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publish statistics on school attendance and reported a 93.9% attendance rate in primary and secondary schools in 2012/13. In May 2014, the Northern Ireland Assembly Public Accounts Committee published Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report. This critical report highlighted that pupils from socially deprived backgrounds, Traveller children and children in care have some of the worst school attendance records.

Of the 105 children and young people aged 8 to 18 that we surveyed in 2013, 91 (87%) of them were of statutory school age between 8 and 16. Of this group, over two thirds (69%) reported they never miss or dodge school but nearly a third (31%) reported dodging school “sometimes” or “a lot”. This suggests that looked after children and young people may be missing school more often than the general school going population.

KEY FINDINGS 2011 OVER 12s

- 88% are currently in education, training or employment
- 60% never miss or dodge school
- 22% had been out of school for more than three months
- 55% of them got help to return

KEY FINDINGS 2012 OVER 12s

- 97% are currently in education, training or employment
- 76% never miss or dodge school
- 14% had been out of school for more than three months
- 63% of them got help to return

KEY FINDINGS 2013 OVER 12s

- 90% are currently in education, training or employment
- 69% never miss or dodge school
- 22% had been out of school for more than three months
- 41% of them got help to return

We have an understanding of the issues that affect school attendance for looked after children. These include underlying social and personal issues, support and stability in placement, attitudes to education in the home or care environment and behavioural issues (NISRA Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of looked after children at post-primary school, 2011)

We found that 22% of participants aged 12 or over had been out of education for more than three months in the previous 12 months. We got a range of explanations for this, some of which are practical and might be addressed by placement planning and management, others needing support to address particular issues and vulnerabilities.

**It's not worth going..
poor relationships
with teachers. I'd like
to have the option of
mainstream**
Male, 15

**Because it melts my
head sometimes.. just
can't be bothered**
Female, 14

**I don't really like
school**
Male, 11

**Been suspended once
from current school...
suspended and expelled
from previous school**
Male, 15

**Changes in placement,
identifying appropriate
school**
Female, 14

**I haven't went and don't
feel that I need to go I have
enough going on in my
placement that annoys
me and I don't want to be
annoyed by going to school**
Male, 15

**I left in June
but I haven't
applied for any
courses yet**
Female, 16

In December 2013 an Assembly Question to the Minister for Education asked



on how many occasions each Education and Library Board has taken legal action against a Health and Social Care Trust ... in each of the last three years.



The response was that no ELBs had taken legal action. In comparison, the Northern Ireland Assembly was advised by DENI that from 2011- 2013, 83 parents and carers had fines issued as a result of children not attending school regularly. While court proceedings are not desirable, preventative measures promoting education and minimising non-attendance by looked after children would be beneficial and should be considered.





Worryingly, only 41% of the group of young people surveyed in 2013 who had been out of school said "yes, definitely" when asked if they got help to return. This is a decrease from 63% in 2012.

In 2011/12, 9% of all looked after children had missed 25 or more school days. Of this group, 33% are children living in residential care and a further 26% were living in other placements. Only 7% of this group who missed 25 or more school days were children living in foster care and 4% in kinship foster care (Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2011/12).

As well as non-attendance, it is important to look at the number of looked after children who have been suspended or expelled from school. The HSCB found that 7% of

children in care who had been in care continuously for one year or more had been suspended or expelled during the school year ending September 2011 (Delegated Statutory Functions Statistical Report, March, 2013).

Looked after children were more than five times more likely to be suspended from school than children in the general school population - 8% of looked after children had been suspended in 2011/12, compared with 1.4% of the general school population during that year.

Children and young people living in residential care were more likely to be suspended than children in any

other placement types. Of those children and young people who were suspended, 28% were living in residential care compared to 12% in foster care (Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2011/2012).

This reflects OLC 2013 findings where the majority (76%) of over 12s who have been out of education for more than three months were living in residential care. This link between missing school

and placement type is evident in all three of our surveys. In both 2011 and 2012 the majority of over 12s who had been out of education for more than three months were living in residential care. Across the three surveys, a total of 56 over 12s had been out of education for more than three months and of these 36(64%) were living in residential care.

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 52% of over 12s who had been out of education for more than three months were living in residential care

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 68% of over 12s who had been out of education for more than three months were living in residential care

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 76% of over 12s who had been out of education for more than three months were living in residential care

This raises concerns about the prevalence of missing school, suspension and expulsion amongst children and young people in care, particularly those living in residential care. Despite the small sample in our surveys, these findings do point to a need to explore how we can better support children and young people living in children's homes with their school attendance and education.

School attendance may already have been an issue for these children and young people before they came into care. The challenge for support workers may be, not only to maintain regular school attendance but also to reintegrate others to education.

When we asked the over 12s living in residential care if they got the help they needed to get back to school after being out, 22% said "yes definitely".

Whilst education can last a lifetime, the opportunities for children to learn in their early years are critical. Missing the chance to learn and achieve risks compounding negative messages about looked after children and education. Given the importance of education to future attainment, every effort should be made to support children and young people and to address any link between living in care, missing school, suspension or expulsion. Any strategy in development by DENI should include this.

Encouraging young people to stay in education

We asked young people if they could identify someone who encourages them to do well at school.

WHO ENCOURAGES YOU TO DO WELL AT SCHOOL? 2011

- Parent (20%)
- Foster carer (19%)
- Social Worker (18%)
- Friend (17%)
- Sibling (12%)
- Key worker (6%)
- Other (6%)
- Nobody (2%)

WHO ENCOURAGES YOU TO DO WELL AT SCHOOL? 2012

- Foster carer (19%)
- Parent (18%)
- Friend (18%)
- Social Worker (17%)
- Sibling (13%)
- Key worker (8%)
- Other (5%)
- Nobody (2%)

WHO ENCOURAGES YOU TO DO WELL AT SCHOOL? 2013

- Foster carer (21%)
- Social Worker (19%)
- Friend (18%)
- Parent (16%)
- Sibling (12%)
- Nobody (6%)
- Key worker (5%)
- Other (2%)

My foster grandparents
Female, 9

VOYPIC staff
Female, 17

Teachers
Female, 9

It's positive that a range of people do this with foster carers, parents, friends and social workers featuring highly but also some self-motivation. When we focused particularly on children and young people living in children's homes, a fifth (20%) identified their key worker as the one who encourages them to do well at school and a fifth (20%) also identified their social worker.

The Children's Care Monitor asks children in care in England annually for their views and how well they were doing in education. Our survey asked this same question and got similar responses. A majority (79%) said they get on "very well" or "well". This is a decrease of 6% from the 2012 survey but is similar to the findings in the Children's Care Monitor which found that 81% were doing "very well" or "well".

OLC SURVEY 2011		OLC SURVEY 2012		OLC SURVEY 2013	
Very well	47%	Very well	61%	Very well	51%
Quite well	35%	Quite well	24%	Quite well	28%
Not very well	10%	Not very well	8%	Not very well	11%
Not well	7%	Not well	7%	Not well	10%

Children's Care Monitor 2011		Children's Care Monitor 2012/13	
Very well	39%	Very well	43%
Well	39%	Well	38%
Just about OK	17%	Just about OK	15%
Badly	4%	Badly	3%
Very badly	1%	Very badly	1%

Table 1. Looked after children rate how they're doing at school



3.5 Living in safety with stability

In our survey, placement has been identified generally as an important issue. We asked children and young people about their experiences and feelings on their placement and about placement stability. Participants talked positively about their placements and shared their feelings about living in the right place.

You should be safe and live with people who care about you

Male, 11

My current placement is more of a home or family than anything else

Male, 18

I think of my new family as my real family

Female, 8

In 2012/13 just over a quarter (26%) of children had been in care under 12 months, 30% had been in care between one and three years, 16% three years to five years, one fifth (19%) had been in care for five to ten years and 9% had been in care for ten years or longer (Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2012/13).

One participant shared her strong views about where she lives and the family she lives with:

I don't like it when they say foster care. I don't think of myself as in care. I think of myself as just being with my new family. I hate having to refer to my family as foster mums or foster grandparents/ foster uncle and aunts. To me they are just my family

Female, 9

We asked participants in our survey about the length of time they had been in care and found that over two fifths (41%) had been in care for over five years, 46% had been in care for one to five years and 13% have been living in care for under 12 months.

We know that safety and stability are important for all children and young people. Children and young people in care face the added challenge of living away from their own, immediate family. They need a placement that has the essential structure, security and safety whilst at the same time being somewhere where they have a sense of belonging, feel cared for and still enjoy privacy.

Changing places

KEY FINDINGS 2013 8 -11

- 75% had not changed placement in the previous year
- 25% had changed placement once or twice in the previous year
- 7% had been in their placement for more than five years
- 21% had been in their placement for under a year

KEY FINDINGS 2013 12 -15

- 62% had not changed placement in the previous year
- 26% had changed placement once or twice in the previous year
- 9% had been in their placement for more than five years
- 38% had been in their placement for under a year

KEY FINDINGS 2013 16+

- 53% had not changed placement in the previous year
- 24% had changed placement once or twice in the previous year
- 29% had been in their placement more than five years
- 47% had been in their placement for under a year

In 2013 our survey shows that almost two thirds (63%) of all participants had not changed placement in the previous year.

We did, however, find a degree of variance across the three age groups which ranged from three quarters (75%) of under 12s who had not moved placement in the last 12 months, to just over half (53%) of over 16s who reported they had not changed placement in the previous year.

The findings show that approximately a quarter of all age groups are reporting changing placements once or twice in the previous year. For the young people aged over 12, 16% reported changing placements three or more times in the previous year which has increased from 10% in 2012. This suggests a higher degree of instability in placement in the older age groups.

In 2013, the Children's Rights Director surveyed 2,305 children and young people in England for the Children's Care Monitor. Most of the children and young people who took part in the survey had just one change of placement in their life in care so far. But some children had a lot of changes. Almost a third of the children (31%) had already had more than three different placements in care so far and 10% had already lived in eight or more different placements.

In Northern Ireland in 2012/13, 77.7% of looked after children had not moved placement in the year ending 31st March 2013 while 7.8% had changed placement three times or more. This data suggests a high number of looked after children have stability in their placements, but it is important to

recognise a degree of instability and its consequences for some children and young people which should be avoided where possible.

When asked what the most important issues are for children and young people in care, one young woman said

Every issue is important but I would highlight having too many placement movements and social worker changes

Female, 17

There is limited data about the number of children who experience multiple moves or the reasons for these. This lack of information should be addressed to inform a strategy for support and prevention.

Friends and others

Thinking next about who's in their community, the survey asked participants how well they get on with their classmates and if they ever experience bullying at school or college. The question about bullying is a flagged question which means that if concerns are raised by a child or young person, they are reported to the local HSC Trust in line with an agreed protocol.

School can be a difficult environment for children and young people. Children in care may also be at a disadvantage due to the stigma associated with care. Just over a third (34%) of participants reported being bullied at school or college "sometimes" or "often" - an increase from 2011.

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 73% get on well with their classmates
- 21% are bullied or sometimes bullied at school
- 79% of them are never bullied

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 63% get on well with their classmates
- 28% are bullied or sometimes bullied at school
- 72% of them are never bullied

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 54% get on well with their classmates
- 34% are bullied or sometimes bullied at school
- 65% of them are never bullied



There is a greater focus on promoting education with children in care which must take account of keeping children safe at school and protecting them from bullying. Within their safeguarding role, teachers and allied support staff can be alert to signs and act to protect.

**Peer pressure,
loneliness**

Male, 16

Although we did not ask specifically about online bullying, we know from practice that this is a growing concern

for children and young people. Digital technology is one of the SBNI's key strategic priorities for 2013 - 2016. Educating children, young people, their parents and carers is crucial to safeguarding children and young people online. This is an issue we expect to see in the future, if we have the opportunity to continue the OLC survey. VOYPIC is also committed to tackling online safety and bullying through our participation and communications work.



3.6 Experiencing economic well being

Young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training (known as NEET) remain a key social policy concern and challenge in Northern Ireland and feature highly in strategic priorities.

Making the transition to independence and adulthood can be especially difficult for young people who have been cared for away from home. Even with support to prepare for leaving care, some young people may not be fully ready to make the transition at 18. This can lead to crises such as homelessness and unemployment especially for care leavers with a limited family or social network. As a result, they may find themselves isolated and have a reduced level of support in the community.

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 10% have a paid job and 24% receive benefits

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 11% have a paid job and 3% receive benefits

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 6% have a paid job and 19% receive benefits

There has been a decline in the number of participants aged 16 and over who are in paid employment since the 2011 survey. In addition to this, the number of participants receiving benefits has increased from 2012 but remains lower than the 2011 survey.

A safe transition from care to economic stability is underpinned by

an effective pathway planning process and the support of multi-agency services. Since 2010 HSC Trusts have introduced employability schemes to enhance the employment and career prospects of young people in care and care leavers by giving them greater confidence to take up and sustain employment.

Education, employment and training

A high proportion (84%) of OLC participants aged 16 to 18 were in education, training or employment. This compares to the Care Leavers Aged 16 -18 Statistical Bulletin 2012/2013 which reported that 62% were in education or training, 7% were in employment and 30% were unemployed or economically inactive. It also reported that the proportion of young people leaving care with no qualifications was 32%, compared with only 2% of general school leavers. Care leavers in foster care prior to leaving care appeared to be at an economic advantage on leaving care, with 91% of kinship foster care and 89% of non-kinship foster care leavers moving into education, training or employment. This is compared to 71% of those in residential care.

The entitlements to support for education of care experienced young people are set out in the Children (NI) Order 1995 and the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2002. The main purpose of the Act is to improve the life prospects of young people who are looked after as they make the transition to adulthood. We found that for those preparing to leave care, having support to make this transition is still of high priority.

The HSCB chairs a regional, multi-agency group to improve and promote support into higher and further education for care experienced young people. There is a degree of local interpretation and the need for clarity of standardised provision of financial support across all five HSC Trusts.

Also, many children need support in further education for example, continuing their A Levels and then going to university.

I am a capable pupil at a grammar school and want to go to university once I have finished my A-Levels that I am doing this year but don't know what support there is available for me once I leave school to help me proceed to uni

Female, 17

Money, money, money

KEY FINDINGS 2011 8 - 18

- 86% get pocket money
- 54% spend all of it each week
- 55% save some

OVER 12s

- 62% have a bank account
- 24% owe money to others

OVER 16s

- 45% get enough money
- 63% get help to manage money

KEY FINDINGS 2012 8 - 18

- 95% get pocket money
- 43% spend all of it each week
- 77% save some

OVER 12s

- 55% have a bank account
- 9% owe money to others

OVER 16s

- 59% get enough money
- 62% get help to manage money

KEY FINDINGS 2013 8 - 18

- 92% get pocket money
- 47% spend all of it each week
- 72% save some

OVER 12s

- 58% have a bank account
- 9% owe money to others

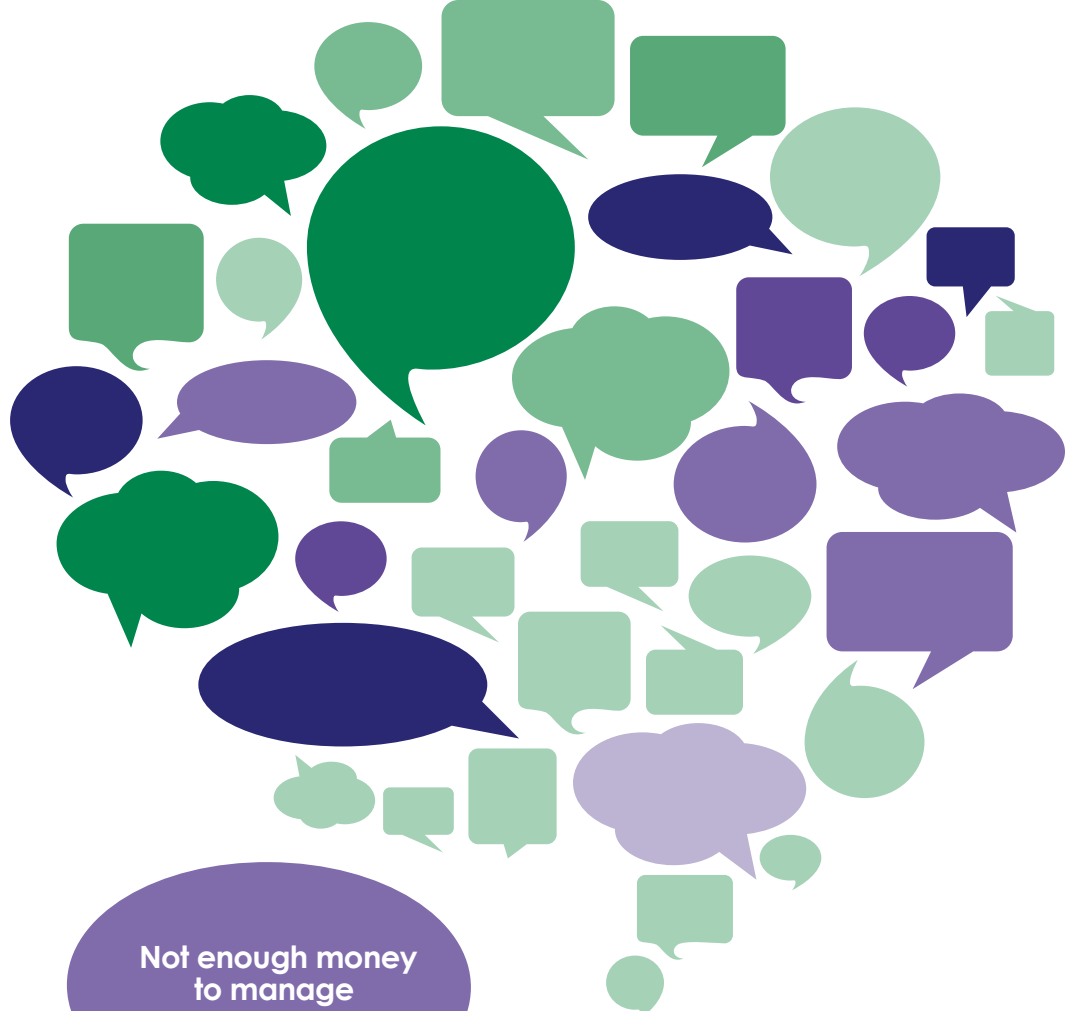
OVER 16s

- 50% get enough money
- 66% get help to manage money

Only half of over 16s say they get enough money but it's encouraging that two thirds (66%) are receiving help with budgeting and money management.

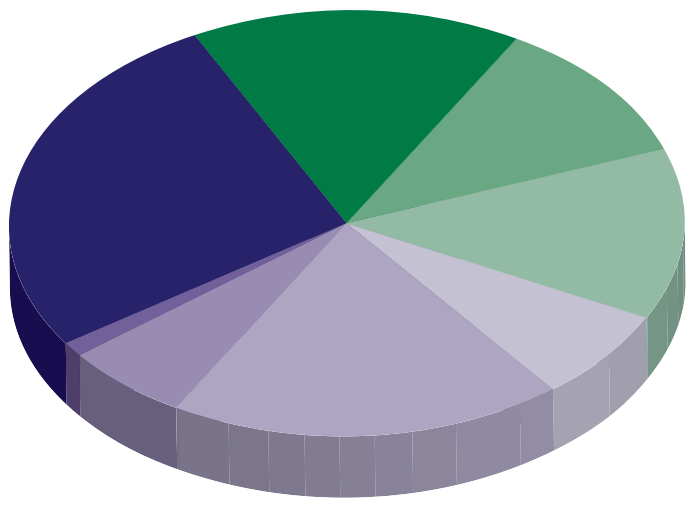
More than other kids
living normally with
their parents
Female, 18

I would like money
for guitar lessons
and possibly for a
laptop
Male, 16



I can manage my money myself
Female, 18

Not enough money to manage
Male, 16



Clothes	27%
Travel/transport	16%
Toiletries	11%
School equipment	13%
Sport or leisure	7%
Other	19%
Bills	6%
Debts	1%

Figure 10. Weekly spending

3.7 Contributing positively to community and society

The OFMDFM's children's strategy has contributing positively to community and society as one of its high level outcomes. The number of young people who participate in youth activities is one of the indicators for the achievement of this outcome.

Children and young people are aware of the stereotypes that can be attached to them because they grew up in care. We explored views and experiences about community and involvement in it.



KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 55% get on well with young people in the neighbourhood
- 74% feel safe in their neighbourhood
- 90% have good friends
- 60% can talk to friends if they have problems

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 54% get on well with young people in the neighbourhood
- 92% feel safe in their neighbourhood
- 88% have good friends
- 62% can talk to friends if they have problems

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 56% get on well with young people in the neighbourhood
- 94% feel safe in their neighbourhood
- 87% have good friends
- 60% can talk to friends if they have problems

Over half (56%) said that they get on well with the young people in their neighbourhood and a large majority (94%) reported feeling safe in their neighbourhood. This is an encouraging increase of a fifth (20%) from 2011. Others have a different experience and some explained why they are unable to keep in contact with their friends:

I don't think anyone who hasn't lived in care would survive here
Female, 13

I was moved too far away
Female, 17



The friends I have are good friends
Male, 15

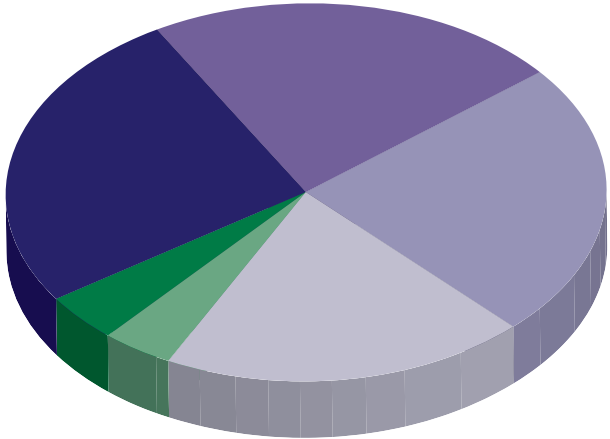
Happy Faces - an organisation for kids with learning disabilities, photography and I go to a church group and VOYPIC
Female, 16

Support network

Although there has been a slight decrease from 2011 in participants having good friends, it is encouraging to see a large majority (87%) enjoying good friends and 60% reported they could talk to their friends about their problems.

It is important for children and young people in care and care leavers to feel part of their local community and to make full use of opportunities for leisure, play and sport. Carers, support workers and social workers should be supported to promote community engagement as a way to increase inclusion in all aspects of community and society.

We gave children and young people a list of options and asked them to identify where they felt it was safe for them to spend time with their friends. The top places were the local park or youth club (20%). Only 3% said that none of these places was safe for them.



Park/Youth Club	20%
Shops	17%
Town centre	18%
Local streets	15%
Skate park or other	3%
None of these	3%

Figure 11. Safe places to spend time with friends



Young people's participation

KEY FINDINGS 2011

- 9% have been on a school council
- 18% have been captain or vice captain of a sports team
- 40% joined local youth or community groups
- 50% helped a charity
- 36% volunteered
- 90% can pursue their hobbies

KEY FINDINGS 2012

- 15% have been on a school council
- 24% have been captain or vice captain of a sports team
- 47% joined local youth or community groups
- 55% helped a charity
- 38% volunteered
- 89% can pursue their hobbies

KEY FINDINGS 2013

- 13% have been on a school council
- 24% have been captain or vice captain of a sports team
- 47% joined local youth or community groups
- 52% helped a charity
- 46% volunteered
- 90% can pursue their hobbies

Young people in care want to see negative attitudes challenged and replaced by accurate images and stories. Positive messages about children and young people in care should be promoted to challenge negative stereotypes and support school and community integration.



Fun and Games

We asked what children and young people did in their spare time and what their hobbies were.

- Computer games
- Going out with friends
- Cinema
- Dancing
- Singing
- Youth club
- Reading
- Sport
- Listening to music
- Going for walks
- Cooking
- Church groups
- VOYPIC groups
- Visiting families

We asked if children and young people could pursue these hobbies as much as they would like to. A large majority (90%) can all or most of the time. The remaining 10% identified travel, being in care and location among the top reasons preventing this. Staffing levels and issues in children's homes were also given as reasons.

Ambitions, dreams and goals

Young people in care may suffer and be labelled with negative stereotypes but they still have ambitions, dreams and goals. We asked them to talk about their ambitions.

I would like to be an actress and a model because I like dressing up and wearing make-up

Female, 9

To become a midwife, start a family and travel the world

Female, 13

Work in the hospitality industry and work in Italy

Male, 15

To get a house of my own when I am older, it's not really profound but it's what I want

Female, 15

My greatest ambition is to finish college, go to university, get a good job, also make my staff, foster mum proud and hopeful to open my own restaurant one day

Female, 18

I want to be a social worker

Female, 16

To grow up and get a good job and have a family

Female, 12

To be a good mum. To go to Tech. To get a house and be a happy family

Female, 16

To be a comic designer or work for Disney

Male, 15

To work with young people in care

Male, 16

To have children

Female, 16

There is growing interest in promoting a positive identity for care experienced young people – the need for which is reflected in this girl's quote:

To get rid of this life (care experience). To grow up and have an enjoyable life with a loving family of my own

Female, 14

Finally, one young girl shared her poignant ambition:

To feel safe, to get on with the family you are living with, to feel cared for and loved, to feel part of a family and being included, to live a life like a child that is not in care

Female, 12

4.0 Recommendations

There is a legislative and policy framework in Northern Ireland that enables the protection and support of children in care and care leavers. There is also a significant amount of departmental, cross-sector and inter-agency work reviewing and planning key legislation, regulation, standards and practice. Mindful of this, we make a number of general and specific recommendations. These echo the calls to action in *Do You Care?* – our manifesto for children in care and care leavers. We are committed to playing our part in taking forward these recommendations and working with others to fully enact the rights and entitlements of children and young people in care.

1. Care and pathway planning

All children and young people should be supported to voice their views and actively engage in decision making and planning for their lives

- Hold child friendly LAC reviews at a time and place to encourage children and young people to participate
- Provide versions of care and pathway plans that are child and young people friendly
- Set up Children in Care Councils in all HSC Trusts

2. Contact

All children and young people should enjoy safe, beneficial contact with their families and friends

- Commission a comprehensive, long-term study into the practice, impact and outcomes of contact for children in care

3. Support relationships

The care system should support and encourage quality and continuity of relationships at its heart

- Review the process and steps for children and young people moving into and through care to promote stable relationships with social workers and reduce changes to support roles
- Fully resource and deliver a quality Personal Advisor (PA) service to all young people leaving care
- Extend support for all care leavers up to the age of 25 to ensure successful transition to independence



4. Placement stability

All children and young people should enjoy stability and permanence and a choice of placement to meet their needs

- Publish data on multiple placement moves and the reasons for them
- Commission research on the causes, impact and outcomes of multiple placement moves
- Consider and develop initiatives and provision to increase the range and choice of placement type

5. Education

All children and young people should enjoy support to attend school to promote learning and achievement

- Publish a policy led by DENI for children in care to promote school attendance, learning and achievement
- Monitor and report on the review, implementation and impact of PEPS
- Research the level, reasons for and impact of missing, suspension and expulsion from school of children and young people in care
- Consider a model of support for young people living in children's homes who would benefit from continued support in a care placement to pursue education or training

6. Safety

Children and young people in care should be safe and protected from harm

- Implement inter-agency action to identify the most vulnerable and at risk children and young people
- Increase awareness of the needs of children in care amongst teachers and allied support staff to prevent and respond to bullying

7. Right to independent advocacy

Children in care and care leavers should have a statutory right to independent advocacy

- Introduce and implement a statutory right to independent advocacy
- Use every LAC review to promote awareness of and access to independent advocacy

5.0 Methodology

The survey

Our Life in Care (OLC) is VOYPIC's Computer Assisted Self Interview (CASI) survey. It can be completed online via VOYPIC's website or offline with downloaded software. A child or young person can complete it alone or with assistance. The benefits of using a CASI are that children and young people are familiar with computers and technology, it is a more accessible format, it is age and ability appropriate, building self-confidence with use and responses are easily anonymised.

Our Life in Care has three age appropriate questionnaires which were developed in consultation with young people. Key questions focus on the care experience - the quality of care; safety and stability, key relationships and participation in care planning. Other questions reflect all the high level outcomes in the OFMDFM children's strategy.

Eligibility

The survey was open to children and young people aged 8 to 18 who were currently looked after by a HSC Trust in Northern Ireland. Participation was voluntary on the part of children and young people.

Ethical approval and oversight

To ensure the safety of participants, VOYPIC secured ethical approval from ORECNI and each of the five HSC Trusts' governance procedures. After reflecting on the 2011 survey VOYPIC made a small number of changes to the approval including

- Introduction of an incentive (prize draws)
- Additions to those people who could provide referral consent to include foster carers, key workers or PAs



There was an advisory group of representatives from the five HSC Trusts, DHSSPS, HSCB, PHA, OFMDFM, CiNI and Queens University.

Consent

Invitations and information about the survey were sent to children and young people, their parents and carers. We asked social workers to discuss the survey with children and complete a referral form for under 16s. Young people aged 16 to 18 completed and returned their own referral form. Passive parental consent was required in four of the five HSC Trusts with active consent required by one.

Confidentiality and child protection

All survey participants were allocated a unique log in code and password to access the survey.

Responses to the survey are anonymous but each participant was advised that confidentiality would be breached if there was a child protection concern. A small number of questions was flagged and monitored as part of a protocol between VOYPIC and HSC Trusts for safeguarding children and young people. Information about support helplines was included at the end of the survey.




Evaluation

We invited participants to feed back on the experience of completing the survey. Across the three age groups 63 (60%) participants responded to the evaluation questions. Responses show that young people value the survey and are managing the range and quantity of questions well.

All 63 participants thought the survey software was “good” or “ok” and 96% reported they found it “easy” or “very easy” to use. On the number of questions just over two thirds (67%) said it was “just right”, 27% said there were “too many” and 6% said there were “not enough”. It can be a challenge for some participants to concentrate on the survey from beginning to end. The format gives the chance to play a game half way through and participants are told they can log

out of the survey at any point and complete it later. We wanted to know if the survey asked about the right things. Over half (57%) said “completely” and 41% said “mostly”. Only 2% said “not really” or “not at all”.

Throughout the survey, children and young people can make use of a notepad. Young people embraced this opportunity and their comments add insight and value to our understanding of their views on life in care. These are some of the responses which clearly show how young people in care value the opportunity to reflect on their experience and what we need to note to improve future surveys.



The questions are great.
However the quiz and the
game backdrop is VERY
outdated

Female, 17

It was very, very, very,
very good!

Female, 10

The survey was
good and it was fair
enough questions

Female, 14

It was a good
questionnaire, very
easy to fill in!

Female, 16

Some of the
questions I feel are
asked twice but just
worded differently

Female, 17

It was easy but too
much questions

Male, 10

Could ask young
people more about our
wishes, what we want
and how we feel

Male, 15

6.0 References

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Queens University Belfast School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Transitions and outcomes for care leavers with mental health and/or intellectual disabilities. Principal Investigator Dr Berni Kelly



VOYPIC

voice of young people in care



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ISBN 978-0-9553454-5-6



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