



**LET'S
CHANGE THE STORY
FOR CHILDREN IN CARE**



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VOYPIC WORKS ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND PROMOTING THE RIGHTS AND IMPROVING THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE CARED FOR AWAY FROM HOME.

THIS IS OUR MANIFESTO FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS.

It is our pledge that we will work so that all children and young people

1. **Voice** their views and wishes in the planning and decision making for their lives
2. Have a statutory **right** to independent **advocacy**
3. Are supported to keep in touch and enjoy **contact** with family and friends
4. Enjoy appropriate, settled and secure **placements**
5. Are protected, **safe** and never exploited
6. Are reflected in positive **images** and news stories that challenge and correct stereotypes
7. Are supported to succeed in **education**, training and employment
8. Are supported to make successful transitions to **independence**, adult hood and economic stability
9. Are supported to address risky behaviour and minimise contact with the **justice** system
10. Enjoy good **health and well-being** while living in and after leaving care

INTRODUCTION

VOYPIC is a charity working across Northern Ireland promoting the rights and improving the lives of children and young people cared for away from home.

They may be living at home in care, with foster or kinship carers, in children's homes, in secure settings or in supported accommodation. They may be preparing to leave care or be care leavers.

Throughout this document we refer to these children and young people as "in care" or "cared for away from home" and "care leavers".

Since 1993, we have worked directly with children and young people encouraging them to participate in the plans and decisions affecting their lives. We support them to have their voices heard. All of our work with children and young people helps us to promote positive change in legislation, policy and practice.

We work in co-operation with voluntary and statutory partners to build effective policy and practice for the safety and support of vulnerable children and young people.

CHILDREN RIGHTS

Universally children's rights are underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention outlines the rights every child has regardless of age, gender, ability or status.

VOYPIC's work is based on the principles contained in the UNCRC. Of particular relevance are Articles 3 and 4 which promote children's best interests and protection of children's rights; and by Article 12 which sets out the right a child has to an opinion and that adults should take this into account when making decisions.



CHILDCARE POLICY

The Children (NI) Order 1995 is the principal statute governing the care and protection of children in Northern Ireland. It has five underpinning principles: paramountcy, parental responsibility, prevention, partnership and protection.

The DHSSPS published Care Matters in Northern Ireland - A Bridge to a Better Future in 2007. Care Matters highlights the importance of stability and permanence in developing positive attachments and improving outcomes for children and young people in care.

Given that Northern Ireland's key childcare statute is now nearly twenty years old, it is timely to consider a review. Updated legislation could reflect recent developments in policy and practice such as the introduction of Personal Education Plans (PEPS) and the growing significance of kinship care. Furthermore, Care Matters would benefit from evaluation and review to determine progress to date and future policy priorities for children and young people in care.

OUR LIFE IN CARE

In 2011 VOYPIC started a new approach in Northern Ireland to gathering the views and experiences of children and young people in care. This new survey is called Our Life in Care and it's a Computer Assisted Self Interview or CASI survey. It identifies what is of most concern to young people and finds out what they think about health, education, safety and the prospect of moving on to independence.

DO YOU CARE?

Now we have developed Do You Care? Let's Change the Story for Children in Care - our manifesto to promote children's rights, improve life chances and raise awareness of the needs of children and young people in care and care leavers.

This manifesto makes a clear statement on what VOYPIC wants to see for the benefit of children and young people drawing on the views expressed in the two CASI surveys. We specify key actions which can be monitored and evaluated to assess progress, outcomes and impacts.



1 ● WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO VOICE THEIR VIEWS AND WISHES ABOUT PLANS AND DECISIONS FOR THEIR LIVES

The Children (NI) Order 1995 is the principal statute governing the care and protection of children in Northern Ireland. It has five underpinning principles: paramountcy, parental responsibility, prevention, partnership and protection.

The State is a corporate parent for looked after children with local HSC Trusts taking a leading role in their care in Northern Ireland. Each is responsible for ensuring that children's needs are met through a care plan which is reviewed every six months at a Looked after Child review (LAC) meeting. A LAC review is the single most practical way to include and engage a child or young person in their care and pathway plans.

Children and young people regularly tell us that it is important for staff and social workers to listen to what they have to say. Children and young people have a mix of experiences when it comes to being involved in their care and pathway planning.

Young people in care need to be listened to more and given the right to make decisions in their own lives

It can be a challenge to ensure that children and young people are, and feel part of, decision making about their lives. This is a sensitive but important part of children's care and support. It is crucial that young people's voices are heard throughout their life in care and the process could be improved.

There are many ways to promote participation amongst children and young people. This can be done informally by including them routinely in planning and decision making and in more formal ways such as LAC reviews. Another effective option are Children in Care Councils (CiCC) which are active in England and Wales. CiCCs allow young people in care to meet with staff from children's services and other professionals to share their views and ideas about their local services. Both LAC reviews and CiCCs create significant opportunities for young people's participation and consultation.

VOYPIC wants to see effective support for young people 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 person friendly**

● **Set up Children in Care Councils (CiCCs) in all HSC Trusts by 2015**



2. WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE TO HAVE A STATUTORY RIGHT TO INDEPENDENT ADVOCACY

A statutory right to independent advocacy would enhance the legal requirements laid down in the Children (NI) Order 1995. In particular Article 45 provides for the child's views to be taken into account during case review and for representations or complaints to be made by a child or young person.


The benefits of independent representation and advocacy for vulnerable children and young people are now well recognised. Over years, inquiries, reviews and reports on children's rights and safeguarding (Munro 2011, RQIA 2011, NICCY 2004, Waterhouse 1997 and Utting 1997) have commented on the value of independent advocacy to prevent harm and protect children and their rights.

The Northern Ireland Executive's current Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse focuses on the care and treatment of children in the care of the State and institutions between 1922 and 1995.

It is significant that there were no effective mechanisms to report concerns nor was there independent representation for children and young people in care during this period.

Since the 1990s, much has changed for children and children's rights. Greater priority is placed on the care and protection of children and young people and the support provided for them.

In 2007, VOYPIC was commissioned by the DHSSPS to provide a regional, independent advocacy service for children and young people in the care of the five HSC Trusts. In 2012, VOYPIC was commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) to provide the service until 2017. To make best use of such a valuable service, it should be promoted to all children and young people in care and care leavers.



Being listened to, having their interests heard and something done about it

VOYPIC wants the Northern Ireland Assembly and the DHSSPS to introduce and implement a statutory right to independent advocacy for all children and young people in care and care leavers

Use the opportunity of every LAC review to ensure that children and young people are aware of the commissioned, independent advocacy service and are clear about how to access it

Implement a statutory right to independent advocacy for all children and young people in care and care leavers by 2015

Promote awareness of the statutory right to advocacy when fully enabled



3 WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE TO BE SUPPORTED TO ENJOY SAFE, BENEFICIAL CONTACT WHICH IS PLANNED, ENABLED AND MANAGED TO ALLOW THEM TO STAY IN TOUCH WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

We know that, regardless of the reasons for coming into care, most children and young people will want to return home. When we asked children and young people what is of most importance to them, contact with family and friends was rated highest.

Contact with family and friends is, therefore, a major issue for children and young people in care but contact is a complex issue.

Although children and young people may want changes made to the way they see their parents, siblings, extended family and friends, it may not always be possible to support

what a young person wants. However, we do need to fully understand what makes contact successful.

Children and young people need help to understand their own situation to fully benefit from contact. We also need evidence on the effect and impact of contact and guidance on how to promote and support it. The shortfall in research on contact was recognised in Care Matters - a Bridge to a Better Future.

For young people in care it's hard to see people around you with their family and then you come home to your foster home and realise you don't have that anymore... I find it hard not being able to see my family

VOYPIC wants to see all children and young people enjoying safe, beneficial contact which is planned, enabled and managed



Commission a longitudinal study to produce evidence on the effect of contact by December 2014



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WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE TO ENJOY APPROPRIATE, SETTLED AND SECURE PLACEMENTS

Children and young people in care live in a variety of placement types depending on their needs and circumstances. They may be living in their own home, more usually they live with foster or kinship carers while a smaller number live in children's homes. Some young people live in secure settings or in supported accommodation.

Reaching decisions about placement may be complex, and children and young people need help to understand why certain decisions are made. They need support when placements break down, when they have to move from one place to another or back to family or foster carers. They need help when they're preparing to leave care and move out on their own.

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 while at the same time being somewhere where they have a sense of belonging, feel cared for and still enjoy privacy.

Children should have a choice of placement to meet their needs and at key stages of their life in care to promote stability.

Placement moves should be kept to a minimum. We have insufficient data about multiple placement moves. There should be more data analysis on this, the reasons for multiple moves and the outcomes and impacts for children and young people.



Since I have been in care I have changed 10 times, it will be 11 before Christmas

VOYPIC wants a choice of placement for children and young people at key stages of living in care and a reduction in the number of placement moves

 **Publish data on multiple placement moves and the reasons for them by 2015**

 **Commission research on the impact and outcomes of multiple placement moves**



5.

WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE TO BE PROTECTED, SAFE AND NEVER EXPLOITED

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) was established by the DHSSPS in 2012. The SBNI is made up of key partner organisations from the statutory, community and voluntary sectors. Its primary aim is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. The plans of the SBNI demonstrate that preventing the sexual exploitation of children and young people is a priority in Northern Ireland.

Children and young people in care should grow up in safe, stable, peaceful placements. They should be protected from harm and exploitation in the interests of their health and well-being, positive self-esteem and educational attainment.



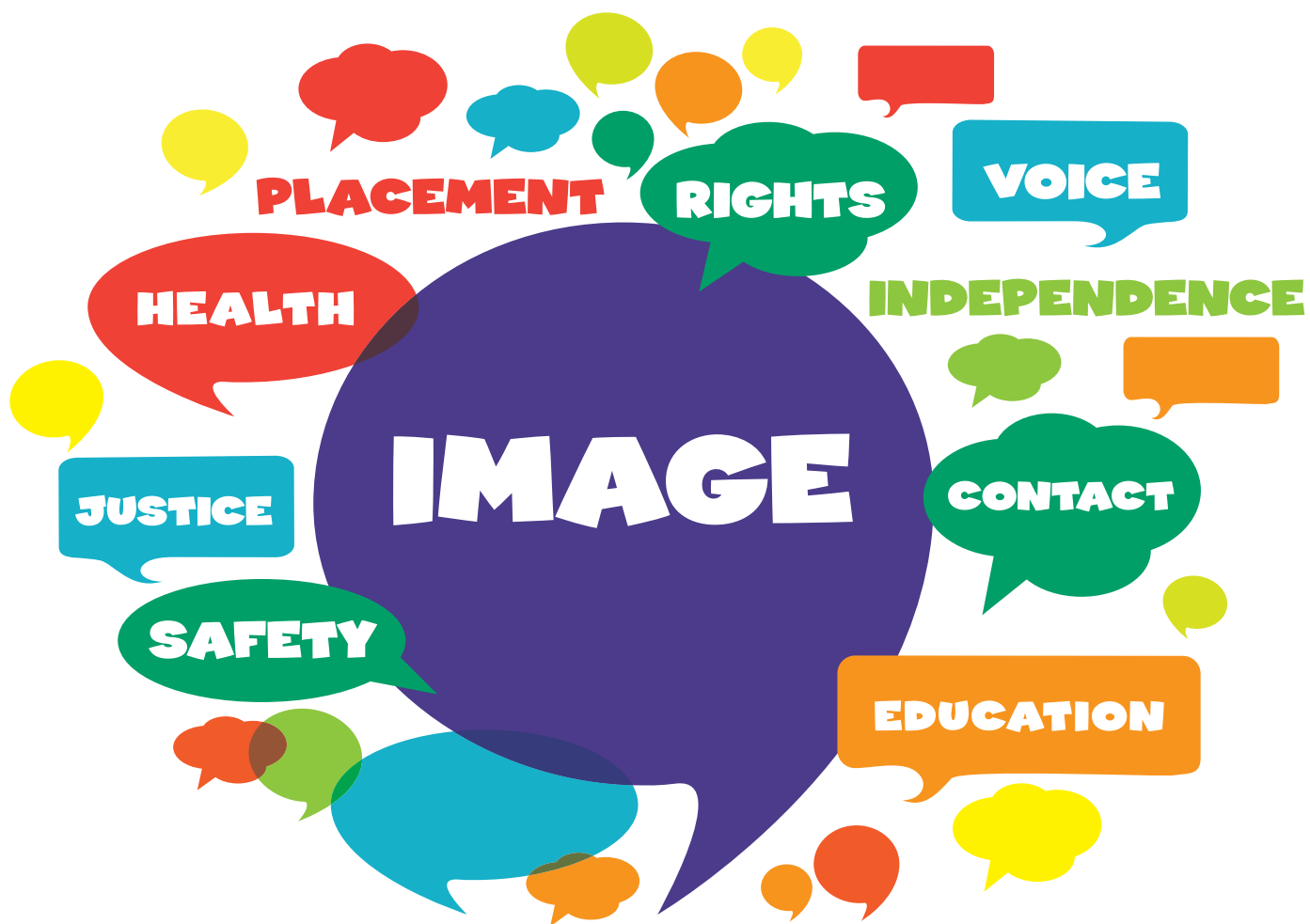
Local research by Barnardo's in 2011 and a report by the Children's Commissioner in England in 2012 reflect that children in care, especially those in residential care, are at greater risk of sexual exploitation. In particular, children and young people who run away from residential placements or children's homes are at greatest risk of being exploited.

Young people who absent themselves without permission give a variety of reasons for their behaviour which include wanting to return home to family and friends. Other reasons are experiencing difficulty in their placement and relationships there.

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.

VOYPIC wants continued inter-agency co-operation to protect children and young people at risk of exploitation and harm

- Identify the most vulnerable and at risk children and young people
- Develop clear preventative measures to promote placement stability and minimise absence without permission
- Develop plans and actions for early intervention to protect children and young people who absent themselves without permission
- Develop and promote protocols between the PSNI and HSC Trusts to identify and address underlying issues to ensure a safe and settled return to care
- Promote access to independent advocacy for children at risk or absent without permission



6. WE WANT POSITIVE IMAGES OF CARE PROMOTED AND MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES CHALLENGED

We know children and young people in care want as much privacy as possible. They are concerned about the number of people who know or need to know about their personal circumstances. In contrast to this, they would like to see positive images of care reflected in the media, on our TV screens and in the newspapers.

Children and young people are aware of the stereotypes that can be attached to them because they grew up in care. They want to see negative attitudes challenged and replaced by accurate and positive images and stories.

VOYPIC recognises the professional priorities and restrictions of news media journalists. There is, however, a need for greater public awareness and understanding of the reasons why children and young people are brought into care and their needs when they are in care.

Not to feel ashamed that you are in care or to feel that you are any different or shouldn't be accepted because you are in care

VOYPIC believes that it is important for children and young people in care and care leavers to feel part of their local community. We believe carers, support workers and social workers should be supported to promote community engagement of children and young people as a way to increase inclusion in community and society.

VOYPIC wants positive images and messages about children and young people in care to be promoted to challenge negative stereotypes and support school and community integration

- Develop and implement a plan in VOYPIC to educate the public and the media on issues about children and young people in care and care leavers**
- Encourage action by local and regional press to report accurate and mindful coverage about care and children in care**
- Implement a multi-agency media campaign, resourced by the Northern Ireland Assembly, promoting positive images of children and young people in care and care leavers**



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● WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE TO BE SUPPORTED TO SUCCEED IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Although some do well, looked after children as a group have poor experiences of education. Reasons for poorer levels of achievement may include coping with trauma and emotional difficulties. Furthermore, post primary school attendance for looked after children is below that of the general population.

School can be a difficult environment for children and young people who may suffer stigma from being in care and find themselves at risk of bullying. Within their safeguarding role, teachers can be alert to signs and act to protect against this.

I have a paid job, I work as a care assistant and I get paid for working and I really enjoy that

In 2011, the DHSSPS and DENI issued guidance for Personal Education Plans (PEPS) for looked after children and young people. Their primary aim is to ensure they are supported to reach their full educational potential. In May 2012 the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA told the Northern Ireland Assembly that the target date for all PEPS to be in place was June 2013.

In recent years key policy initiatives have tried to narrow the gap in outcomes for care leavers. The main purpose of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002 is to improve the life chances of young people as they make the transition to adulthood.

GEMS (Going the Extra Mile Scheme) promotes continuity and stability of living arrangements for young people aged 18 to 21 after leaving care. GEMS is currently only available for young people in foster or kinship placements. In any year, over 230 young people access GEMS and its value is well recognised. The Welsh Assembly is currently proposing to introduce a similar scheme to better support continuity and stability of care during the transition to independent living.

VOYPIC wants HSC Trusts and schools to promote and support school attendance to ensure active learning and achievement

- Retain the joint working group to monitor the implementation and impact of PEPS
- Cooperate on information sharing between DHSSPS and DENI to progress the introduction of PEPS and publish a joint progress report
- Research the level, reasons for and impact of suspension and expulsion from school of children and young people in care
- Implement a model of support similar to GEMS for young people living in children's homes who would benefit from continued support in a care placement to pursue education or training



8.

WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE TO BE SUPPORTED TO MAKE A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE, ADULTHOOD AND ECONOMIC STABILITY

The Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002 outlines the services and entitlements for young people leaving care, provided through a 16 plus service in each HSC Trust. From the age of 16, young people in care have a right 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 or training.

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 and serious 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 without support in the community.

Don't have a clue what is going to happen. No one has spoken to me about it

The transition from care to independence should be facilitated through effective pathway planning and the support of a PA to help plan and build skills for independent living. It is crucial that a PA is assigned at the earliest opportunity to provide continuity of support for the young person. They should help to identify resources for successful transition and independence.

A multi-agency approach can provide the best support for care leavers. This approach should reflect the commitment of all the key service providers including the HSC Trust, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, floating support services, health and medical care services and social welfare.

VOYPIC wants the transition from care to economic stability to be underpinned by effective pathway planning and the support of multi-agency services

- Extend support from HSC Trust 16 plus services to all care leavers up to the age of 25 to ensure successful transition to independence**
- Fully resource and deliver a quality Personal Advisor (PA) service for all care leavers**
- Ensure standard access for all care leavers to the setting up home allowance**
- Report on the effectiveness, outcomes and impact of employability schemes managed by each HSC Trust**

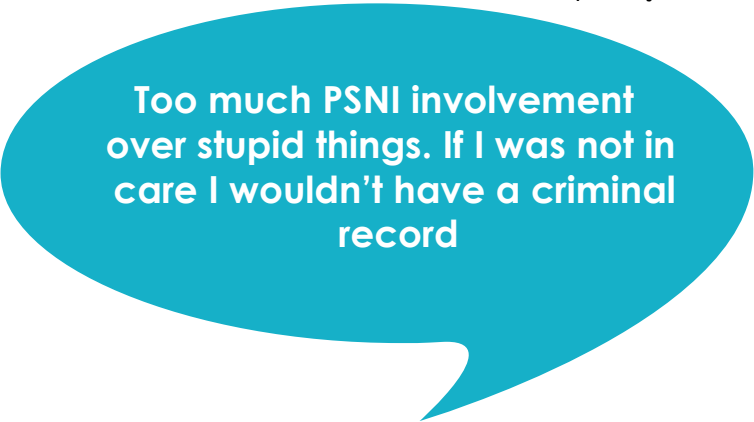


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● WE WANT TO MINIMISE YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM THROUGH PREVENTION AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

Some young people in care can become involved in risk-taking and offending behaviours. These behaviours may be a consequence of traumatic events and the experience of coming into care. In particular, children and young people who live in residential care are vulnerable to coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Behaviour such as criminal damage and assault is likely to trigger a police response and involvement with the youth and criminal justice systems.

To help manage risky behaviour more effectively and reduce police attendance at incidents in children's homes, the HSC Trusts and PSNI have developed joint guidance. This good practice should help to address the interface between the HSC Trusts and the justice system. HSC Trusts have also introduced therapeutic models of practice which favour prevention and early intervention.






Too much PSNI involvement over stupid things. If I was not in care I wouldn't have a criminal record

We need to reduce the criminalisation of young people by preventing and resolving the behaviour and incidents which give rise to it including the misuse of alcohol and drugs. Detaining children and young people in custodial and secure institutions should be used as a measure of last resort, only in exceptional circumstances and for the shortest appropriate period of time.

We need specialist support for young people with alcohol and substance abuse problems. We need on-going commitment to preventative action, early intervention and the use of restorative justice to help reduce reoffending. We need resources and commitment to the rehabilitation and re-integration of young people coming from custody.

VOYPIC wants to prevent unnecessary and unjust criminalisation of children and young people in care

-  **Do not place looked after children in custody because of a lack of a suitable bail address**
-  **Secure access to independent advocacy for any care leavers held in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre**
-  **Develop effective models of treatment specifically for children and young people with drug and alcohol dependency**



10. WE WANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO ENJOY GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING WHILE LIVING IN AND AFTER LEAVING CARE

Children and young people in care and care leavers can suffer health neglect which may lead to unhealthy lifestyles and mental health problems. Health may be compromised by abusive and neglectful parenting but public care may also fail to repair and protect children's health. All aspects of children's health are important from promoting physical health and wellbeing to treating acute illness and disability. Children's mental health is of particular concern.

Unlike the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland has not yet benefited from a large-scale prevalence study of the mental health of the looked after population.

In 2006, VOYPIC published a literature review on the mental health of looked after children and care leavers in the UK and Northern Ireland. A year later, we published "Don't be so Formal, I'm Normal" which looked at the mental health of looked after children and care leavers. This report called for a comprehensive regional assessment of the mental health needs of children and young people cared for away from home and care leavers.

I worry about my mental health as it can sometimes be unstable

This was echoed in 2011 in the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's (RQIA) Review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This report calls for operational protocols for the seamless transfer of young people from CAMHS to adult services.

There are a number of significant studies currently underway in Northern Ireland. The findings from these should increase our knowledge and understanding of both physical and mental health needs. Furthermore, Transforming Your Care presents the strongest opportunity to set out comprehensive, planned and resourced services for children in care.

VOYPIC wants to see a comprehensive regional assessment of the mental health needs of children and young people in care and care leavers



Ensure that TYC addresses the accommodation, health and care needs of children in care and care leavers



Develop a strategy to meet the mental health needs of children and young people in care and care leavers



Develop operational protocols to allow for seamless transfer of young people from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to adult services



VOYPIC WANTS...

- To see effective support for young people to voice their views and actively engage in decision making and planning for their lives
- The Northern Ireland Assembly and the DHSSPS to introduce and implement a statutory right to independent advocacy for all children and young people in care and care leavers
- To see all children and young people enjoying safe, beneficial contact which is planned, enabled and managed
- A choice of placement for children and young people at key stages of living in care and a reduction in the number of placement moves
- Continued inter-agency co-operation to protect children and young people at risk of exploitation and harm
- Positive images and messages about children and young people in care to be promoted to challenge negative stereotypes and support school and community integration
- HSC Trusts and schools to promote and support school attendance to ensure active learning and achievement
- The transition from care to economic stability to be underpinned by effective pathway planning and the support of multi-agency services
- To prevent unnecessary and unjust criminalisation of children and young people in care
- To see a comprehensive regional assessment on the mental health needs of children and young people in care and care leavers



We welcome comments and feedback on our manifesto.

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