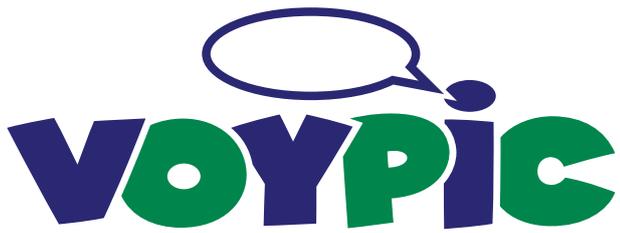


# CASI 2011 Report



voice of young people in care

## Support, friendship, love and care

a recipe for looking after  
children and young people  
in Northern Ireland



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## Glossary of Terms

<b>CASI</b>	Computer Assisted Self Interviewing
<b>CiNI</b>	Children in Northern Ireland
<b>CYPSP</b>	Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership
<b>DENI</b>	Department of Education Northern Ireland
<b>DHSSPSNI</b>	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
<b>HSCB</b>	Health and Social Care Board
<b>HSC Trust</b>	Health and Social Care Trust
<b>JJC</b>	Juvenile Justice Centre
<b>LAC</b>	Looked after children
<b>OFMDFM</b>	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
<b>ORECNI</b>	Office of Research Ethics Committees Northern Ireland
<b>PA</b>	Personal Adviser
<b>PEP</b>	Personal Education Plan
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>VOYPIC</b>	Voice of Young People in Care

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## Foreword

### **Support, friendship, love and care**

– an eleven year old boy sums up what's important to children and young people in care and, in doing so, supplies the recipe for an effective system. So, it's not that complicated but we need to get it right, every time, all the time, for every child and young person being looked after away from home.

As Aristotle said:

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

VOYPIC is running the CASI survey to collect the views and experiences of looked after children and young people in Northern Ireland. After just one survey we know that it has the potential to tell and teach us so much about what it's like to live in care; what works best; and what could be done better.

Our first survey sample may be small with 121 participants and it isn't exactly representative of the whole population of looked after children and young people. It is, nonetheless, a significant body of current information that comes directly from children and young people experiencing life in the care system.

VOYPIC's vision for CASI is that it will become an annual and routine part of the care system in each HSC Trust in Northern Ireland. It has the potential to be an effective way of engaging with children in the care of the state. It will find out what they think of that care, how well it's working for them and what we might do to make it sure it works well all the time.

**Vivian McConvey**  
Chief Executive Officer, VOYPIC



# Acknowledgements

## **We are grateful to:**

- Firstly, to all of the children and young people who took the time to complete the survey; and for their thoughtfulness and generosity in sharing their views and experiences. The onus 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 the foster carers and social workers who promoted the survey and encouraged children and young people's participation
- To the members of the CASI advisory group
- To everyone in VOYPIC who helped with the survey
- To our funders on this project: The Atlantic Philanthropies and the DHSSPSNI



## 1.0 Introduction

At 31 March 2011 there were 2,511 children and young people in care in Northern Ireland (Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2010/11). Although care experienced children and young people are regularly consulted on single issues or localised priorities, this information is not widely disseminated and usually only integrated into a specific piece of work. Therefore, only very limited qualitative information, about looked after children in Northern Ireland, is published on a regular basis.

Six high level priorities and outcomes have been established in OFMDFM's children's strategy – (Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge, OFMDFM, 2006), however, there is nothing in place to allow care experienced children and young people to evaluate or comment on government's effectiveness in meeting the pledge. For planning purposes the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) has adopted the strategy's six high level outcomes but there is currently no single method to measure, on a yearly basis, progress towards meeting those outcomes for looked after children. Furthermore, currently in Northern Ireland there is no single method to measure the satisfaction levels of care experienced children and young people about the services they receive.

In 2011, VOYPIC launched the CASI survey to collect the views and experiences of looked after children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland annually. The survey uses an automated, computer assisted self-completion interview – 'CASI' – which can be completed either on or off-line. Through CASI, for the first time, care experienced children and young people can collectively express their views and experiences about the care system.

One feature of CASI is that young people are part of the process of disseminating the findings to influence policy, practice and legislation; VOYPIC will use CASI in its work with young people to build their capacity to represent themselves at local and strategic levels.

This first CASI report summarises the experiences of looked after children and young people on the key issues prioritised in the children's strategy. The comments in this report are a reflection of the views of the 121 children and young people who participated in the survey in 2011.

## 2.0 Essentials

### 2.1 The best and worst about living in care in Northern Ireland

The CASI survey allows us to report on the most positive and most negative findings from each of the three, age appropriate questionnaires. Here are the essential positive and negative findings from the CASI 2011 survey.

### 2.2 The best bits about living in care

The most positive findings from all three surveys fall into four categories:

- Social interaction
- Support
- Photos
- Safety

#### Social interaction

- 90% (109/121) have good friends
- 84% (62/73) are happy with arrangements for staying overnight with friends or family
- 72% (77/106) get on well with their classmates
- 79% (84/106) are never bullied at school

Children and young people with an experience of care can face social isolation and stigma. It is reassuring to see that the participants of the survey can identify that they have good friends and get on well with their class mates.

Recent changes in policy have placed more of the day-to-day arrangements for a child with their carers. This includes staying overnight at friends' homes. The success of this is suggested within the survey with 84% of participants saying they are happy with the arrangements for staying overnight with friends and family.

#### Support

- 90% (109/121) have an adult they can trust
- 89% (108/121) have an adult they can go to if they have a problem or are upset
- 76% (16/20) got the help they needed with contraception

Large majorities from all three surveys report positive information about their support networks. Very positively, 90% of participants say that they can identify an adult they can trust or an adult they can go to for help (89%).

The rate of teenage pregnancy for girls aged 13 to 16 in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland is three times that of the rest of the UK. While this issue is not confined to children with an experience of care, it is reassuring to see that the majority (76%) of participants in this survey who needed help with contraception received it.

## Photos

- 74% (90/121) have enough photos of family who are important to them
- 73% (89/121) have enough photos of people who are important to them

We know that a sense of identity is important to children and young people being looked after away from home. Having photographs of family and special people is one, valuable way of building and maintaining a sense of connection and identify.

## Safety

- 89% (108/121) feel safe in their neighbourhood
- 80% (97/121) feel completely safe in their placement
- 72% (87/121) feel completely settled where they live

As corporate parents, HSC Trusts have a duty to provide children in care with stability and security. Most children in care will be living in a new area so it is encouraging to learn that the majority (89%) of participants feel safe in their neighbourhood. It is also positive that the majority of participants (80%) feel safe or settled (72%) in their placements.

## 2.3 The worst bits about living in care.

The most negative findings from all three surveys fall into three categories:

- Nutrition and health
- Life story
- Care and pathway planning

### Nutrition and health

- Only 51% (62/121) eat breakfast five days a week
- Only 16% (20/121) eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day
- 40% (49/121) worry or sometimes worry about their health

Being healthy is a key action of OFMDFM's children's strategy. This is emphasised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 6 – 'All children have the right to life. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily'

It is worrying to see that only half of all CASI survey participants eat breakfast five days a week and only 16% of them are eating five fruit and vegetable portions per day. It is also concerning to see that 40% of participants worry or sometimes worry about their health.

### Life story book

- 40% (49/121) have no life story book at all
- 26% (32/121) don't have enough for their life story book

Life story work is identified as something which will aid a sense of identity and belonging. In contrast to how many children and young people told us they do have enough photographs of people important to them, it is disappointing to learn that as many as two thirds of participants have nothing at all or not enough of a life story book.

### Care planning for 8 to 11 year olds

- 62% (13/21) said they did not know what their care plan is
- 38% (8/21) said that no one talks to them at all about their care plan

### Decision making for 12 to 15 year olds

- Only 10% (5/49) said they are fully able to have a say about decisions about their future

### Pathway planning for 16 to 18 year olds

- 51% (23/51) said they cannot really talk to their personal advisor

Twenty-one children aged 8 to 11 completed the survey; two findings about their care planning are of particular note and indicate a need for action. In the survey for 12 to 15 year olds, 49 young people completed the questionnaire; one finding indicates a need to increase efforts to involve them more in decision making. Finally, 51 young people aged 16 to 18 participated with half (51%) saying they are unable to talk to their personal advisor (PA). This finding calls for consideration of the most effective way to implement pathway planning for care leavers.

A care plan is central to the delivery of services to meet a child or young person's assessed needs. It is concerning that two thirds of 8 to 11 year olds did not know what their care plan is. Also worrying is that over a third of participants feel they are not talked to about their care plan.

Promoting and supporting young people's involvement in LAC reviews is not a new issue but the finding that only 10% of 12 to 15 year olds feel fully able to have a say in decisions about their future highlights the need for more attention and action.

The role of the PA should help to construct and implement a young person's pathway plan as they prepare to leave care. A pathway plan should provide continuity of support through the transition to independence and adulthood and identify resources and services to meet needs. It is concerning that 51% of survey participants said they cannot really talk to their PA.



## 3.0 Methodology

### 3.1 Ethical Approval and Oversight

To ensure the safety of participants and a sound research base, VOYPIC secured ethical approval from ORECNI (Office of Research Ethics Committees, Northern Ireland) and each of the five HSC Trusts' governance procedures.

We set up a project advisory group of representatives from the five HSC Trusts, DHSSPSNI, HSCB, OFMDFM, CiNI and Queens University. This group provides advice and comment on methods and instruments to obtain the required information; advises and comments on the development of the survey; and quality assures all outputs.

### 3.2 The survey

CASI is designed as a computer based self interview survey which can be completed online via VOYPIC's website or offline with downloaded

software. A child or young person can complete the survey alone or with assistance. The benefits of using a computer assisted self interview are that children and young people are already familiar with computers and technology; it is a more accessible format; and it is age and ability appropriate building self confidence with use.

CASI has age appropriate questionnaires for 8 to 11 year olds; 12 to 15 year olds; and for young people aged 16 to 18. Key questions in the survey focus on the care experience – the quality of care; safety and stability; key relationships; and participation in LAC reviews. Other questions reflect high level outcomes in the children's strategy:

- Health and lifestyle
- Education, training and employment
- Community and leisure

### **3.3 Eligibility**

Participation in CASI is voluntary on the part of children and young people.

In 2011, looked after children and young people aged 8 to 18, in the care of the HSC Trusts' LAC and 16+ teams, were identified as eligible and invited by VOYPIC to take part in the survey. Social workers promoted the survey with children and young people in their care and completed consent and referral forms for children under 16. Young people over 16 can complete and return the consent form themselves.

### **3.4 Consent**

Given the nature of the survey and the target participants, parental consent for children under 16 and user consent for young people over 16 was required before completing the survey.

### **3.5 Log in identification**

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

### **3.6 Confidentiality and child protection**

While responses to the survey are anonymous, each participant was advised that their confidentiality would be breached if there was a child protection concern raised by their response to some questions. A small number of survey questions was flagged and monitored as part of a protocol for safeguarding children and young people completing the survey which had been agreed between VOYPIC and the five HSC Trusts.

### **3.7 Data**

Tables of the responses to all three age appropriate questionnaires are available on the VOYPIC website [www.voypic.org](http://www.voypic.org)



## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Respondents to the CASI 2011 Survey

#### 4.1.1 Response rate to CASI 2011

The Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland from 2010/11 reported that there were 2,511 children and young people in care at 31 March 2011. Overall, 121 children and young people in care, aged 8 to 18 completed the CASI 2011 survey. This is approximately 5% of the total care population of Northern Ireland

but approximately 7% of those aged 8 to 18 and eligible to take part in the survey. This low response rate reflects the fact that this was the first CASI survey; and that there was no incentive to take part. The findings do, however, present valuable information on a key group of children and young people in society.



### 4.1.2 Locality

The 121 participants come from all five HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland. The table below provides a breakdown.

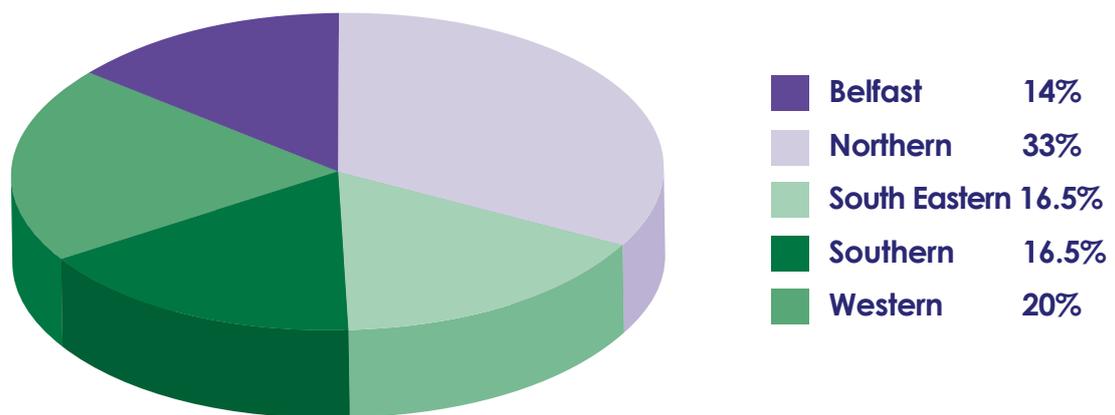


Figure 1. CASI 2011 participants by HSC Trust



### 4.1.3 Age

The Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2010/11 reported that of the 2,511 children and young people in care, 21% were aged 0 to 4, 30% were aged 5 to 11, 34% were aged 12 to 15 and 15% were aged 16 or over. In the 5 to 11 age group CASI only surveyed children aged 8 to 11 which could be estimated to account for approximately 18% of the looked after population.

In the CASI sample, 17% were aged between 8 and 11; 40% were aged 12 to 15; and 43% were aged over 16. In terms of age, the sample is not representative of the full population of looked after children and young people in Northern Ireland – the CASI sample is under represented in the 8 to 11 and 12 to 15 age groups; and over represented in the 16+ age group.

### 4.1.4 Placement

The Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2010/2011 report that 74% of children in care live in foster care; 10% live in residential care; and 10% are placed with family members.

An analysis of the placements of the 121 participants of the CASI survey show that 38% were living in foster care; 27% were living in residential care; and 23% were living in kinship foster care.

The placement type of CASI participants is not in proportion to the overall population of looked after children in Northern Ireland and is not representative of the current looked after population by placement.

### 4.1.5 Gender

The gender profile of the CASI 2011 sample almost exactly reflects that of the overall looked after children population. The CASI sample was almost evenly split with 51% male and 49% female participants. This data reflects data published in the Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2010/2011 which reported that of the 2,511 children and young people in care in Northern Ireland 52% were boys and 48% were girls.

### 4.1.6 Ethnicity and Nationality

The ethnic profile of CASI 2011 participants is similar to those published by the DHSSPSNI.

The majority (94%) of the survey sample were white and 5% reported they came from a mixed background. This compares to the Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2009/10 Statistical Bulletin which reports that 96% of children and young people in care were white and 4% came from different ethnic backgrounds.

The profile of the CASI sample was further broken down by nationality. 51% of participants in the sample were British, 36% were Irish and 6% reported that they did not know and 7% selected 'other'.

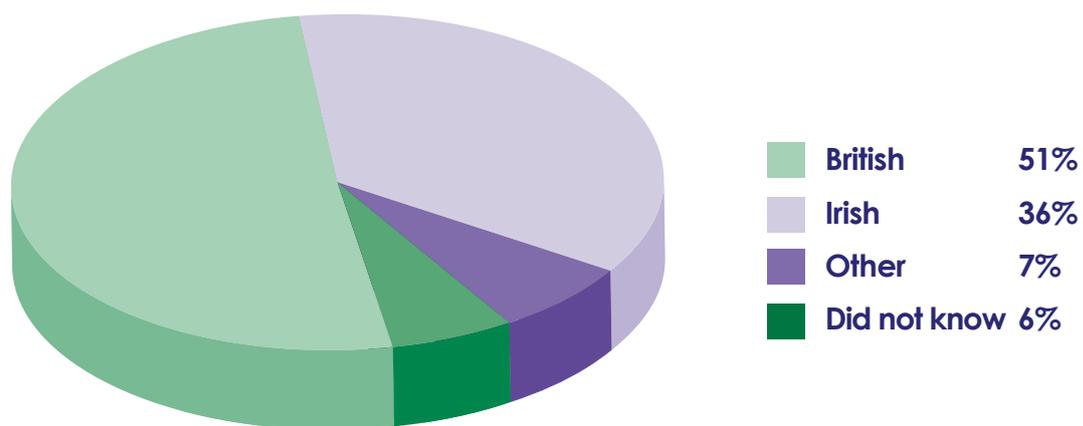


Figure 2. CASI 2011 participants by nationality

### 4.1.7 Religion

The religious background of the CASI sample echoes the general profile for children in care in Northern Ireland.

The Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2009/10 Statistical Bulletin reports the religious background of children in care is 49% Catholic, 47% Protestant and 4% listed other, none or unknown. The religious background of the CASI sample was 44% Catholic, 39% Protestant, 6% did not want to say, 4% didn't know, 4% selected other and 3% had no religion.

## 4.2 Health – the best possible start in life

### 4.2.1 Health of looked after children

The OFMDFM children's strategy recognises the significance and priority of health in the lives of children and young people saying:

'All children should be given the best possible start in life and their health should be of paramount importance.'

The action plan goes on to say that:

'We must also recognise that health is much more than just physical well-being and we need to give due care and consideration to the mental health of our children and young people.' (Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge Action Plan 2008-2011)

The Chief Medical Officer's report – Health of the public in Northern Ireland – cited in the Bamford Review of 2006 estimated that more than

20% of young people are suffering 'significant mental health problems' by their 18th birthday (Bamford Review, 2006).

While it is recognised that care experienced children and young people are a disadvantaged group, to date there has been no regional, methodical assessment carried out in Northern Ireland to identify their health needs or health outcomes. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that poor health impacts on a range of outcomes including education, employability, quality of life and future parenting.

Looked after children are amongst the most socially excluded of our child population. A series of government reports have highlighted the extent to which health neglect, unhealthy lifestyle, and mental health needs characterise children and young people living in public care. Their health may not only be jeopardised by abusive and neglectful parenting, but public care itself may fail to repair and protect health and may even exacerbate damage and abuse. (Health for All Children, David M. B. Hall & David Elliman, 2003)

The priority themes of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) highlight the need to improve the health outcomes of looked after, care experienced and homeless young people.

Recently a regional health and wellbeing working group was established in Northern Ireland to improve the health outcomes for looked after children. In addition, several HSC Trusts have employed



a specialist nurse for looked after children. The role of the nurse specialist is to carry out assessments; provide information, advice and support; and work individually or with a group to promote health and well being.

## 4.2.2 Exploring personal views about health

The CASI 2011 asked a number of health related questions and specifically explored diet, nutrition, weight and smoking. The survey also gave children and young people the opportunity to say how they feel about their own health and to provide an insight into this.

### Key Findings

- 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

The Health and Social Wellbeing Survey in 2005/06 indicated that 8% of children aged 2 to 15 in Northern Ireland were obese. The first CASI health related question was on diet and nutrition. In response, 75% of participants rate their diet as healthy. The survey explored further, revealing that only 16% of CASI participants eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

In comparison, the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBA) is a school-based survey conducted among 11 to 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. The survey covers a range of topics relevant to the lives of young people today such as nutrition, smoking and alcohol. This survey was carried out in 2010 and found that only 8% of those surveyed eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

From these two results it would appear that children and young people living in care may be eating more healthily than those not living in care. In any event, it is clear more needs to be done to promote healthy eating for all children and young people.

The CASI survey found 51% of participants have breakfast five or more days a week. In comparison the YPBA survey found that 55% of young people surveyed had breakfast five school days a week and 80% of young people will usually have breakfast at the weekends. While it is reassuring to see similarities between children and young people in care and their peers, these two sets of data highlight that just over half of children and young people are having breakfast. More needs to be done to encourage all children and young people to eat breakfast regularly.

The CASI survey asked about fitness and can report that 40% of participants exercise at least five days a week. In comparison the YPBA survey found that 12% of young people surveyed had exercised five days in the previous seven days. While it is good that over three times as many CASI participants exercise five days a week compared to a survey of their peers, both these sets of data would suggest more needs to be done to encourage children and young people to be active in order to meet strategic aims for healthy living and fitness.

### 4.2.3 Young people's worries about health

#### Key findings

- 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

The CASI survey asked participants to focus on their general health and found that 40% worry or sometimes worry about their health. Taking this further, the young people were asked to comment on what they worry about. The most common worries were about weight and emotional health.

One participant said they worry about

**“My health, as my friends say I am fat, but I know I am not but maybe I am wrong”**

Female, 12

Other worries included getting old; teeth; unexplained pains; and breathing difficulties.

One participant said

**“It's mostly my mental health as I do a lot of caring for others and try my best to help them and this bungs me down and makes me upset”**

Male, 17

The CASI survey did not ask any direct questions about emotional well-being or mental health. However, given the comments made in response to health worries, it is worth noting earlier research undertaken by VOYPIC. Don't be so Formal, I'm Normal is an overview of the mental health and well-being of a broad range of care experienced young people.

The research identified five aspects of living in care that impact most significantly on mental health:

- Coming into care
- Placement changes and moves in care
- The overall care experience
- Leaving care
- Family contact

(Don't be so Formal, I'm Normal. A research report on the mental health of looked after children/care leavers in Northern Ireland, VOYPIC 2007).

The YPBA survey asked young people if they were on a diet to lose weight. 12% surveyed were on a diet and a further 24% said no but they felt they needed to lose weight. The young people were also asked to comment on their body size:

- 51% felt their body size was just right
- 10 % felt their body shape was too thin
- 27% felt their body size was a bit too fat
- 5% felt their body was much too fat

Given the strong messages from these two surveys it is evident that body image is an issue faced by many children and young people. More should be done to promote a healthy body image and support self esteem with children and young people irrespective of their background.

#### 4.2.4 Sex and drugs and rock and roll

The 12 to 15 and 16 to 18 age-appropriate questionnaires in the CASI survey included a series of questions on alcohol, drug use and sexual health. A total of 100 young people who completed the survey fall into these age categories.

Almost a fifth (17%) of CASI participants believe they need help to stop smoking; 5% of participants believe they need help because of drinking too much; and 6% of participants felt they need help with drug or substance misuse.

A minority (20%) of participants needed help with contraception with most of them (80%) reporting that they received the help they needed but the remaining 20% reporting that they felt they did not really get the help they needed. Using a similar though not exactly the same question, the YPBA survey reported that 53% of those young people surveyed would find it easy to get contraceptives.



## 4.2.5 Oral and general health

The oral health of Northern Ireland's youth population is the worst in the UK. Research from the Office of National Statistics (2004) with children throughout the UK revealed that 61% of five year olds in Northern Ireland had signs of decay compared to the UK average of 43% for the same age group. A recent study carried out by Queens University found that children in Northern Ireland have the highest level of tooth decay in Europe.

The CASI survey explored dental hygiene and 73% of participants stated they had seen their dentist in the previous six months. In addition, 76% of participants had been seen by their GP in the previous six months. It is reassuring that looked after children and young people are availing of dental and GP care.

## 4.2.6 Summary – the health of looked after children

Article 6 of the UNCRC highlights that all children have a right to life and that responsible government should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

Public health policies and strategies in Northern Ireland focus on issues such as obesity in childhood; the increase in emotional and behavioural problems among children and young people; and the poor outcomes experienced by children in the most at risk families. It is evident, even in the small CASI sample and from other research that health issues such as weight, diet, exercise and body image are important to all children and young people. There is a lack of research into the emotional health needs of looked after children; however the fact that 40% of our small sample reported worrying about their health, including their emotional health, suggests that more research and support is needed in this area.

## 4.3 Enjoying, learning, achieving

### 4.3.1 Outcomes for care experienced young people

It has generally been recognised that, across a range of measures, long term outcomes for care experienced children and young people are not good.

According to the Northern Ireland Care Leavers aged 16 – 18 Statistical Bulletin, 2009/10 compared to the general population, young people leaving care are:

- Approximately 20 times more likely to leave school with no qualifications
- Twice as likely to be unemployed
- Significantly less likely (57% compared to 90%) to be in education, employment or training
- Three times more likely to be coping with a disability

It is important to highlight, however, that figures such as these typically compare children with a care experience to the general population average rather than with children from the same background but who have not experienced care. These poor outcomes are usually associated with being in care rather than taking account of the reasons a child had to be taken into care in the first place.

### 4.3.2 The education of children and young people in care

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) publishes details of the Northern

Ireland GCSE examination results each year. In 2010, 76% of enrolled students achieved grades A\* to C at GCSE level. In stark contrast, only 17% of care leavers in Northern Ireland aged 16 to 18 in 2009/2010 achieved five A\* to C grades at GCSE level (Northern Ireland Care Leavers aged 16 – 18 Statistical Bulletin, 2009/10).

Other research into this subject of key significance to the development of children and young people includes VOYPIC's LACE project and the report – Branded a Problem (2002). The research highlighted a number of barriers to educational achievement including:

- Almost three quarters of the sample of 52 care experienced children and young people aged 9 to 17 had changed school in addition to their transfer to post primary level
- Changes of care placement and/or school placement were disruptive to school work. In addition, the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding a move affected young people's levels of concentration
- The 25 professionals who participated in the research explained educational underachievement in terms of the damage that had already been done before young people became looked after. This took the form of already established poor school attendance; poor listening skills; and poor concentration



Given this knowledge about poor educational outcomes for looked after children compared to the general population, the CASI survey explored education with all the participants to get an insight into their thoughts and feelings about school, college or training.

### Key findings

- 88% are currently in education, training or employment
- 58% enjoy school, college or training
- 60% never miss or dodge school
- 22% of over 12s had been out of school for more than three months
- 55% of them got help to return

In Northern Ireland around 13% of young people aged 16 to 19 are not currently engaged in education training or employment (Labour Force Survey 2010). This is similar to the number of participants of the CASI survey (88%) who reported being currently in education, training or employment. It is encouraging to note that the majority of CASI participants were in some form of education as the Northern Ireland

Statistical Bulletin for Care Leavers Aged 16 to 18, 2009/2010 reported that young people leaving care without qualifications were twice as likely to be unemployed compared with care leavers with qualifications.

The CASI survey also found that 58% of participants enjoy school, college or training which compares to the YPBA survey carried out in 2010 which found that only 38% of young people like school "a lot" and 45% liked school "a bit". It is reassuring to see that over half of CASI participants enjoy school with one participant commenting

**"I like my teachers, they are very understanding and I like the school.**

**All in all it's brilliant."**

Male, 16

### 4.3.3 Missing school, missing out

The YPBA survey reported that 82% of young people surveyed had not missed or dodged school during that school term. In contrast, the CASI survey found that only 60% of participants never miss or dodge school. It would seem from this sample that looked after children and young people miss school more often than the general youth population.

Exploring further about why participants miss or dodge school, the survey asked for comments. The majority felt school was 'too boring'; that they don't get on with their teachers; or they don't like school.

One girl said that

**“School was too far away from [my] placement and at the time [ I ] didn't care about school”**

Female, 13

Another participant added they were

**“Too upset with family stuff to go to school”**

Female, 15

Yet another participant said they miss school as

**“Sometimes I don't sleep well due to the noise and disruption within the home.”**

Female, 16

These comments suggest that more needs to be done to address the link between living in care and missing school to try and improve the school attendance of looked after children.

When children who are not looked after do not attend school, the responsibility is placed on their parents who may face a penalty for their child's non attendance. HSC Trusts have corporate parental responsibility for looked after children and have access to a wide range of resources. It is incumbent upon HSC Trusts to do more to promote the importance of attending school with the children and young people in their care.

### 4.3.4 Not in Education, Employment or Training

The CASI survey also focused on those participants who were not in education, employment or training. Worryingly, we found that over a fifth (22%) of CASI participants over the age of 12 had been out of education for more than three months in the previous year. We asked the participants to comment on why they were out of education.

Of this group 55% stated they got the help they needed to return to education. While it is positive that over half of this group were supported back into education, a significant number reported that they did not receive the help they needed. This would suggest more needs to be done to help young people to re-engage with and maintain their education.

#### Some of the responses included

**“Because I didn’t sleep well”**

Female, 16

**“I kept on running away from school and was suspended”**

Male 16

**“I didn’t like my course”**

Female, 17

**“Got threw out of school and then no other school would take me”**

Male, 16

**“I didn’t want to go”**

Female, 16

**“I’m going through a lot at the moment so I am not able to go”**

Female, 16

### 4.3.5 Encouraging young people to stay in education

Positively, participants of the CASI survey reported that they are encouraged to do well at school or college by a number of significant adults and contacts in their lives including a parent, social worker, foster carer and friends.

A policy brief by ARK (Access Research Knowledge, Northern Ireland) in December 2010 entitled Young People not in Education, Employment or Training discussed the difference between young people who come through awful situations and do well in education and those who do not. The brief reflects that a significant factor influencing the outcomes was having a key relationship.

The need for stability was highlighted particularly for those whose lives are disrupted by various factors.

VOYPIC provides a mentoring service for care experienced children and young people aged 12 to 18 with a particular focus on the young person's educational requirements. The aim of the service is to improve future career prospects, aspirations and key motivators. Success and achievement in education assist in increasing a young person's self esteem and self confidence and provides a more positive outlook for the future. The mentoring relationship also focuses on the personal development of the young person and addresses key issues such as social exclusion; independence; and interpersonal and coping skills.

CASI 2011		Children's Care Monitor 2011	
Very Well	47%	Very Well	39%
Quite well	35%	Well	39%
Not very well	10%	Just about ok	17%
Not well	7%	Badly	4%
		Very Badly	1%

**Table 1. Looked after children rate how their are doing at school**

The education of looked after children is a national issue facing all those with corporate parenting responsibility. The Children's Care Monitor asks children annually for their views on a range of issues and in 2011 asked children in care how well they were doing in education. The CASI survey asks the same question. Table 1 compares the responses of looked after children in Northern Ireland who completed CASI with those of looked after children in England who completed the Children's Care Monitor.

The two sets of data show similarities between those children reporting they feel they are doing very well or well at school. There are, however, differences between those who report they are not doing well, although this may be attributed to the differences in the survey's structure and response options. It is reassuring to see that the majority of children in both surveys feel they are doing well or very well in education.



One CASI participant reflected on his experience of not attending college

**“I used to go all the time when I first went to college, but I soon got bored and swapped my studies for a hassle free, skipping lifestyle instead. I left college early, and I now regret not working at it harder”**

Male, 17

#### **4.3.6 Summary – the education of looked after children**

In England a personal education plan is an integral part of a looked after child's care plan. This plan is a joint responsibility between the local authority and the school to identify how the child can fulfil their educational potential.

In Northern Ireland, in 2011, DHSSPSNI and DENI issued guidance for the introduction of personal education plans (PEP) for looked after children and young people. PEPs focus on the whole child or young person to ensure they take advantage of the best learning opportunities within education. They recognise the relationship between the home environment, school and other opportunities available to children and young people to engage in youth work or alternative programmes (Care Matters, 2009). It is hoped that with the introduction of PEPs that looked after children and young people will be helped to reach their full educational ability and that this will help with future employability.

Future CASI surveys will continue to ask children and young people in care about their thoughts and feelings on education. With PEPs only recently introduced in Northern Ireland, it will be interesting to monitor what impact the plans have in the education careers and attainment of looked after children.

## 4.4 Living in safety with stability

### 4.4.1 Care and protection for looked after children

The UNCRC Article 19 highlights that all children should be properly cared for and protected from violence, abuse or neglect by anyone who looks after them.

Living in safety with stability is one of the key outcomes in OFMDFM's children's strategy. This highlights as core values the need for children to live in a peaceful, non threatening environment and the need for children to be protected. The initial action plan (2008 – 2013) for the ten year strategy further emphasises the importance of safety and stability stating that

“Every child should grow up feeling safe and we must ensure that they are protected from harm, giving particular focus to those who are vulnerable or at risk.”

The strategy has identified key indicators which include the number of looked after children who have remained in the same placement for more than two and a half years, the number of former looked after children aged 19 who are in training, education and employment; and the number of primary school pupils who are bullied.





#### 4.4.2 Young people's experience of placement

In light of the importance of safety and stability for children looked after away from home, CASI 2011 began to explore participants' experiences and feelings about their placements and placement stability.

The Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2010/2011 reported on the length of time children and young people have been in care. 21% of children had been in care for more than five years and 25% had been in care for under a year. The CASI survey asked about the length of time participants had been in care and found that almost half (49%) of participants had been living in care for more than five years and 12% have been in care for less than one year. One participant added that she had been in care since she was a baby.

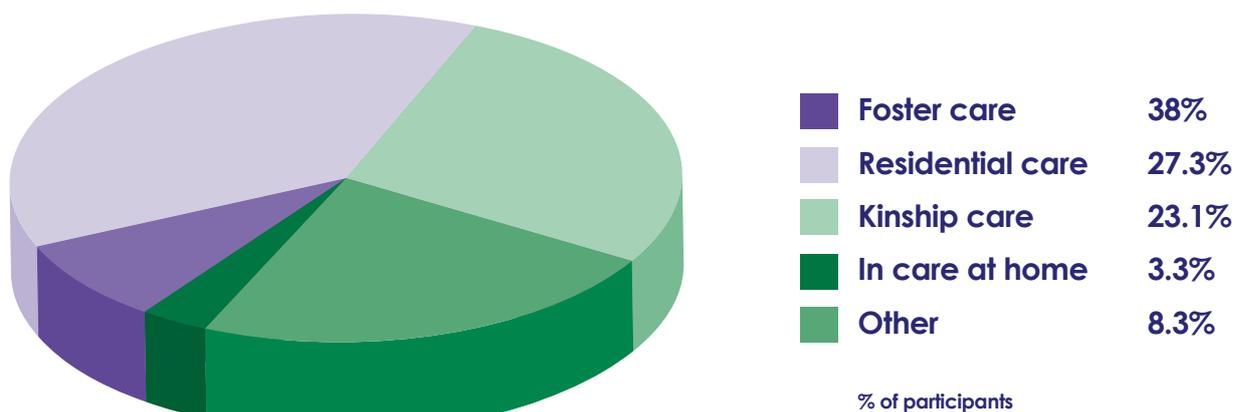
It is important when children and young people are taken into care to give consideration to the need for permanency and stability, especially when a decision is made for a child

not to return home to their family. A permanency plan for children and young people in care can take several forms including long term foster care or adoption.

The Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2010/2011 report that 74% of children in care live in foster care; 10% live in residential care; and 10% are placed with family members.

CASI 2011 collated the views and experiences of 121 looked after children and young people of which 38% were living in foster care; 27% were living in residential care; 23% were living in kinship foster care; and the remainder living in other placement types.

### CASI Survey: Placement type



**Figure 3.** CASI 2011 participants by placement type

The placement type of CASI participants is not in proportion to the overall population of looked after children in Northern Ireland and is not representative of the current looked after population by placement. This feature of the sample in the 2011 survey suggests strategies and priorities for the promotion of the survey in future years.

PLACEMENT TYPE	CHILDREN ORDER TABLES	CASI 2011
Foster care	74%	38%
Residential care	10%	27%
Family or kinship foster care	10%	23%

**Table 2.** Looked after children by placement type



### 4.4.3 Changing places

#### Key findings

- 62% had not changed placement in the previous year
- 23% had changed placement once or twice in the previous year
- 31% had been in their placement for more than five years
- 31% had been in their placement for under a year

The Children in Care Northern Ireland 2009/10 Statistical Bulletin reports over one fifth (21%) of children in care had changed placement more than once during the year ending 30 September 2010.

The CASI survey also explored the number of placement moves within a 12 month period and found that 75 children and young people (62%) had not changed placement in the previous year but that 23% of participants had changed placement

once or twice in the previous year. Both sets of data suggest a high number of looked after children have stability in their placements.

The Children's Care Monitor 2011 reported an average number of five placement changes for participants. Worryingly, the Monitor reported an increase in the number of placement moves of participants from four moves in the previous year. We are unable to draw a direct comparison between this and the CASI survey as this figure takes account of the number of moves since the child came into care.

Care Matters 2007 promotes the positive outcomes of care experienced children having stability and states that

'...the lack of permanence and stability in the lives of children and young people who are in care can contribute to poor educational attainment, low self esteem, disruptive and challenging behaviours leading to a number of them coming into conflict with the law.'

With this in mind, it is good to note that 38 children and young people (31%) in the CASI survey have been in their placement for more than five years while 31% of participants have been in their current placement for under a year.

One child added a comment about her placement saying

**"I love it here"**

Female, 8

and another participant added that they

**"...enjoy where I live  
and to me it's home"**

Female, 13

#### 4.4.4 Feeling settled, safe and secure

The participants of the CASI survey were asked to comment firstly on how settled they felt where they live and then how safe they felt where they live.

##### Key findings

- 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
- 79% of them are never bullied

It is reassuring that 72% of participants feel settled where they live and 80% feel safe where they live. The Children's Care Monitor 2011 asked participants how safe they feel in the building where they live and the majority (78%) reported feeling very safe.

Children and young people in care face the challenge of living outside of their own, immediate family unit. Safety and stability in a placement can be difficult to achieve as this reflects the child's views and

perceptions about the immediate surroundings including privacy and security and the child's sense of belonging in that placement. However it is reassuring that looked after children and young people in both Northern Ireland and England report feeling safe where they live and a high percentage of children and young people in Northern Ireland report feeling settled in their placement.

The CASI survey further explored feelings of safety and asked participants to comment on how safe they feel in their neighbourhood and got a reassuring answer with 90% feeling safe in their neighbourhood.

The YPBA survey carried out in 2010 found that 94% of participants see safe in the area they live in. It is reassuring to see the high figures in relation to how safe children and young people feel in their area. It is also reassuring that figures from the CASI survey show that looked after children and young people are feeling safe not just where they live but also in their neighbourhood.



#### 4.4.5 Friends and others

The CASI survey explored the issue of friendships and bullying at school with 106 (88%) of the 121 participants who are currently at school, college or in a training placement.

Of this group 73% report they always get on well with others at their school, college or training placement and 79% report they are never bullied at their school, college or training placement.

In a similar way, the Children's Care Monitor asked children and young people looked after in England how often they are bullied. This question was not isolated to the school environment and reported just under half of participants (48%) are never bullied. In comparison the YPBA survey found that a much higher number (84%) of young people surveyed had not been bullied in the previous 12 months.

The two Northern Ireland based surveys report that a high number of children and young people are not bullied. DENI has published guidance for promoting positive

behaviour with schools as part of its anti bullying policy. This provides staff with guidance on developing an anti bullying culture within schools.

It is positive to see that the majority of CASI participants are not bullied. For some young people in care, however, school can be a difficult environment where they may face the stigma of being in care and find themselves at risk of being bullied. Teachers need to be alert to the risk of looked after children being bullied and how this may impact on the child and their attendance.



## 4.5 Experiencing economic and environmental well being

### 4.5.1 Economic well being for care experienced young people

The OFMDFM's children's strategy specifies outcomes for all children in Northern Ireland which include that all children should experience economic and environmental well being. Key indicators in the achievement of this outcome are the number of children living in poverty; the number of children living in materially deprived and low income households; the number of families presenting as homeless; and the number of families living in temporary accommodation.

Indicators for experiencing economic and environmental well being are reflected in the Children's Services Plan 2008 – 2011 which sets out key indicators for children in care and care leavers which include:

- number of care leavers over 16 still in touch with their social worker

- number of care leavers receiving financial assistance towards the cost of education or training
- number of looked after children over 16 engaged in education, training and employment

As previously mentioned, it has generally been recognised that, across a range of measures, long term outcomes for care experienced children and young people are not good. Based on DHSSPSNI figures for 2009/10, compared to the general population, young people leaving care are

- Approximately 20 times more likely to leave school with no qualifications
- Twice as likely to be unemployed
- Significantly less likely (57% compared to 90%) to be in education, employment or training
- Three times more likely to be coping with a disability

## 4.5.2 Leaving care, leaving home

Northern Ireland Care Leavers Aged 16 – 18 Statistical Bulletin 2010/2011 reports that 9% of those who left care during this period did so as they had moved to supported or unsupported accommodation. CASI explored accommodation with the same 16 to 18 age group and found that while the majority of participants remained in foster care (41%) and in residential care (37%) a small number of participants were living in supported accommodation (2%) and one participant lived on their own, independently. It is reassuring to see that the majority of children are remaining in their care placement until the age of 18.

Looked after children, living in foster care, are offered the option of remaining in their placement past the age of 18 if they are engaged in education, training or employment. This is known as the 'Going the Extra Mile' or 'GEM' scheme. The aim of the scheme is to provide continuity and stability for young people by supporting and enabling them to achieve better outcomes in their training, employment, education and career goals.

Care leavers who had been living in foster care prior to leaving care appear to be at an economic advantage on leaving care, with over two thirds (73%) moving into education, training or employment, compared with 62% of care leavers from residential care placements. (Northern Ireland Care Leavers Aged 16 – 18 Statistical Bulletin 2010/2011). This is, however, a significant increase from the previous year when only 25%

of care leavers from residential care placements moved into education, training or employment.

## 4.5.3 Money, money, money

The CASI survey asked children and young people in care about finance and 86% of all participants reported that they are given pocket money. The survey explored this further and 54% told us that they spent all their pocket money each week while 55% saved some.

Almost two thirds (62%) of survey participants aged over 12 have a bank account; and 24% of them reported they owe money to others. While it is positive in these hard times that some children are beginning to recognise the value of money, the fact that some children report owing money to others suggests the need for more support and input on budgeting and money management.

### Key findings

- 86% get pocket money
- 54% of them spend all of it each week
- 55% of them 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
- 10% have a paid job and 24% receive benefits

The CASI survey asked participants over the age of 16 about their sources of income – 10% have a paid job; 24% receive benefits; and the remaining participants receive a maintenance allowance or pocket money from their local HSC Trust. In response to this line of questions, nearly half (45%) of participants over 16 said that they get enough money to live on each week and almost two thirds (63%) feel they get the advice they need to help manage their money.

Some young people further commented on their finances

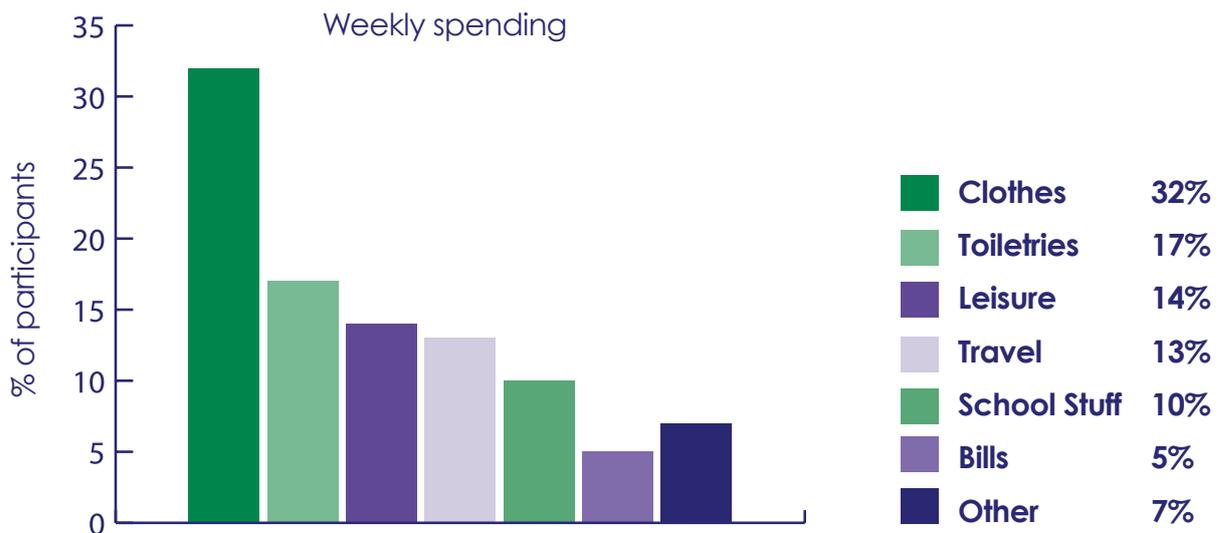
**“I am not very good at saving money but I do get enough”**

Male, 17

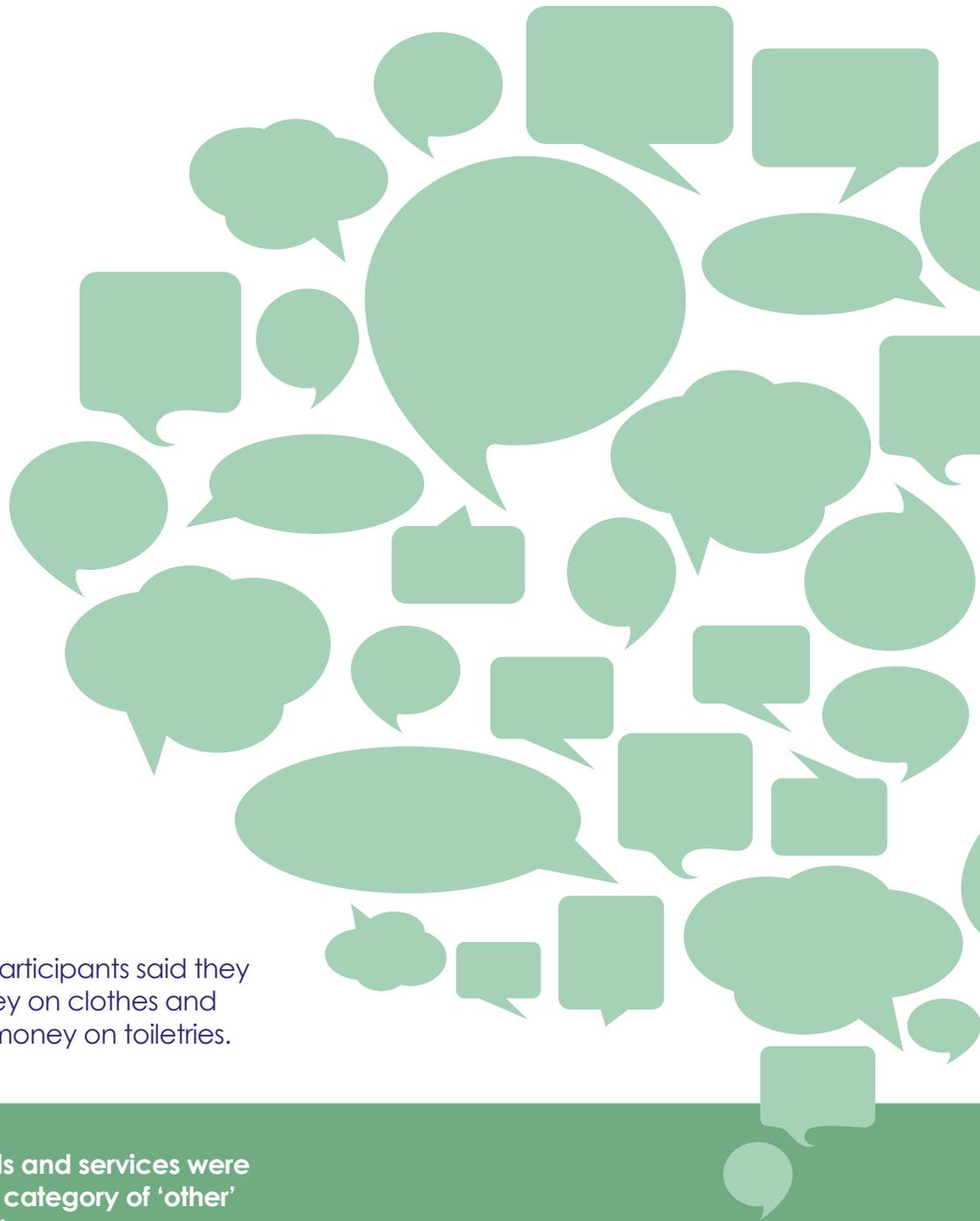
**“At the age of 17, £15.92 does not cover the cost of teenage living”**

Female, 17

CASI asked young people over 16 what they spend their money on.



**Figure 4. Weekly goods and services purchased**



A third (32%) of participants said they spend their money on clothes and 17% spend their money on toiletries.

A variety of goods and services were listed against the category of 'other' purchases including:

- Mobile phone top ups
- Cigarettes
- Heating
- Groceries

It is positive to see the majority of participants over 16 are receiving help with budgeting. Support through pathway planning should equip young people with the information and skills for future budgeting, money management and independence.



#### 4.5.4 Education, Training and Employment

The Northern Ireland Care Leavers Aged 16 – 18 Statistical Bulletin 2010/2011 reported that 65% of care leavers were in education, training or employment and reported that care leavers with no qualifications were twice as likely as those with qualifications to be unemployed or economically inactive. In comparison, a higher number (76%) of CASI participants aged 16 to 18 were in education, training or employment.

Given the generally poor outcomes for care leavers in educational attainment and employment it is reassuring to see from both of these data sets that so many care leavers are still engaging in education, training or employment.

The main purpose of the Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002 is to improve the life prospects of young people who are looked after as they make the transition to independent living. Under this Act a young person's entitlement to financial and service assistance has been improved. CASI 2011 found that support for care leavers continues to be a significant issue for those responsible for corporate parenting and the future welfare of looked after children.

## 4.6 Contributing positively to community and society

### 4.6.1 A child's right to play

Article 31 of the UNCRC states children have the right to relax and play and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

OFMDFM's children's strategy echoes this right in one of its high level outcomes – contributing positively to community and society.

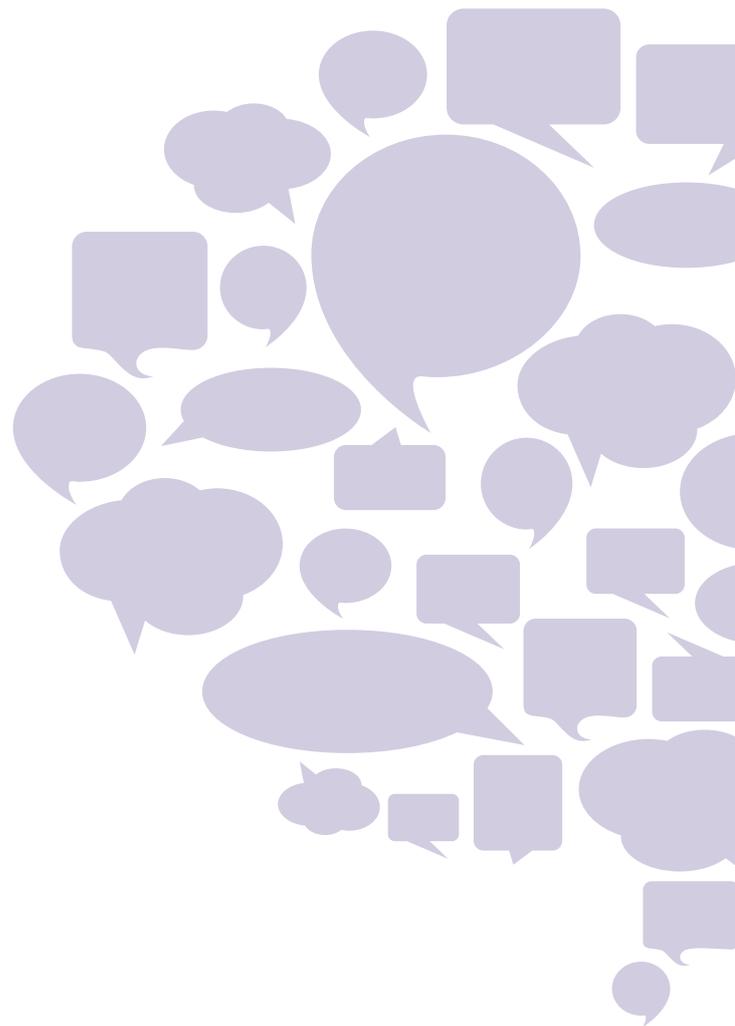
The number of young people who participate in youth activities is one of the indicators for the achievement of this outcome. Other indicators focus on young people and the justice system. One of the drivers for change is additional supports for foster carers.

DENI set out a vision for the youth service:

- All young people are able to enjoy themselves, realise their potential and participate as active citizens in a secure and peaceful society
- All young people know their rights and responsibilities and have these rights protected and promoted
- All young people are valued, understood and involved and feel safe and supported

Youth work tends to be targeted at young people who are marginalised or excluded from their community or society. The practice of youth work is primarily with those young people who 'don't fit into' something or 'are

causing problems' to someone or are having difficulties that mainstream society cannot deal with effectively (Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland 2005 – 2008).



## 4.6.2 Including looked after children in local communities

Looked after children should be a priority target group for youth work services. Society has a negative image of looked after children, and many feel they are stereotyped due to their experience of care. The CASI survey explored the views and experiences of looked after children and young people about their community and their involvement in it.

### Key findings

- 55% get on well with young people in the neighbourhood
- 74% feel safe in their neighbourhood

Over half (55%) of participants said that they get on well with young people in their neighbourhood and three quarters (74%) feel safe in their neighbourhood.

The experience of looked after children is that many have been moved to placements outside of their family neighbourhood and are faced with the challenge of fitting into a new community. Some young people are labelled or treated differently by a community as they live in a residential care home. Positive images of children in care should be promoted so that these children and young people are not stereotyped but seen as individuals and part of local communities.

The YPBA survey asked respondents to consider their neighbourhood and asked if they could identify

areas they felt were safe and welcoming to meet up with their friends. Almost a quarter (23%) could identify a lot of areas; over half (53%) could identify a few; and 17% reported there were none.

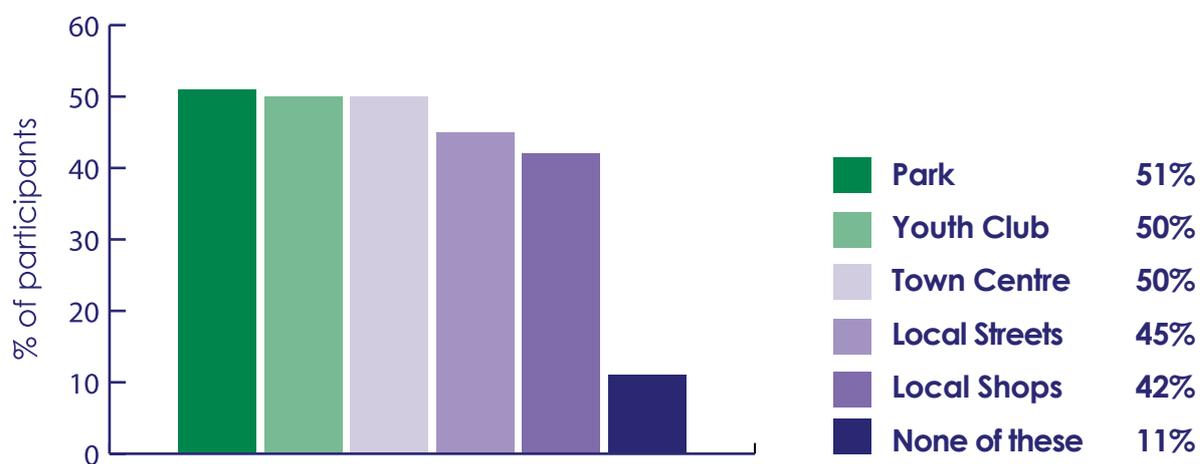
In comparison, participants of the CASI survey were given a list of options and asked to identify where they felt it was safe for them to spend time with their friends. The figure below shows that the top five places identified were a park (51%), a youth club (50%), the town centre (50%), local streets (45%) and local shops (42%). Just over one tenth (11%) of CASI participants felt none of the listed places were a safe place for them to spend time with their friends.

Some CASI participants added that they feel safest with their friends in a house. One participant added that they do not feel it is safe for their friends to come into their neighbourhood because of religion. The Children's Care Monitor 2011 explored the issue of keeping safe – participants were asked how safe they felt in different places. Overall, children felt safest in the building where they live; in school; and in the countryside. They felt least safe in towns or cities.

It is reassuring that children and young people living in care in Northern Ireland can identify places where they feel safe.



### A safe place to spend time with friends



Participants could make multiple choices; total does not equal 100%

**Figure 5.** Safe places to spend time with friends

### 4.6.3 Getting on at school and beyond

The CASI survey explored school and community participation with respondents.

#### Key findings

- 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

A school council is a group of pupils elected by their peers to represent them and their views. Over half (59%) of respondents in the YPBA survey thought that a school council was an effective way for pupils to get their views across. In Northern Ireland 9% of CASI participants have been a member of a school council while almost a fifth (18%) have been a captain or vice captain of a sports team.

It is good to see that looked after children and young people are

getting involved in school life. Looked after children and young people need to be encouraged to engage in school activities. This will help them feel they are contributing to the wider school life and provide them with both a sense of achievement and participation.

The Young Life and Times survey 2009 reported that 54% of participants had volunteered in the previous 12 months. In similar fashion, the CASI survey explored participants' involvement in their local community. Significantly, 40% of participants have joined a local youth or community group; exactly half (50%) have helped a charity by donating or raising money; and over a third (36%) have given up time to help others as a volunteer. From the CASI results it is good to see that looked after children and young people are playing an active role in helping in their local communities.

While the majority of participants (74%) reported feeling safe in their neighbourhood, some young people used the CASI survey to voice their difficulties in fitting into their community.

One CASI participant discussed her difficulty saying that she felt it was an important issue for children and young people in care.

**“Trying to fit in with other young people in the community, being accepted as part of the community and not being outcast because of being in care. People at my school think because I live in care I must be poor.”**

Female, 14

School and community activities should be promoted as this engagement can help looked after children and young people to feel part of their local community. It would also help to challenge negative views and stereotypes. Carers, support workers and social workers should make every effort to encourage and promote community engagement of looked after children and young people as a way to increase inclusion in community and society.





#### 4.6.4 Fun and games

The CASI participants were asked to list their hobbies and pastimes and the most popular responses were:

- Listening to music
- Shopping
- Texting
- Sport
- Drama
- Horse riding
- Watching films
- Spending time with friends
- Playing computer games
- Spending time with family especially parents
- Art
- Going to youth club
- Facebook
- Cars
- Watching TV

The participants were then asked if they can pursue their hobbies as much as they like to; and a big majority (90%) can, all or most of the time.

The remaining 10% who were unable to pursue hobbies as much as they would like identified location, travel and finance among the top reasons preventing this. In addition, staffing and issues in residential units were

given as reasons why young people cannot pursue their hobbies as often as they would like. Similarly, the YPBA survey reported that time, transport and location were the most common prohibiting factors to their access to play and leisure. It would seem that children who are not living in care face the same barriers to pursuing their hobbies and pastimes.

## 4.7 Living in society which respects rights

### 4.7.1 Rights for children

The UNCRC outlines a total of 54 articles which relate to children's rights. This universal document specifies a child's right to health, equality, education and the right to an opinion.

The OFMDFM's children's strategy outlines the importance of children's rights and has pledged in line with the UNCRC to be proactive in obtaining the views of children and young people on matters of importance to them. The strategy also highlights the importance of children's rights as individuals and states, in relation to its six high level outcomes, that

'A child living in a society which respects the rights of the child should achieve in the other five outcome areas.'

Looked after children are acknowledged as a vulnerable category of children to whom

advocacy services are especially important in order to promote their self-esteem and knowledge of their rights (Children's Rights in Northern Ireland; NICCY 2004).

VOYPIC offers an independent advocacy service for children and young people with an experience of care. The service aims to help children and young people find out about their rights; enable them to make choices about the services they are entitled to; and to be fully involved in the decisions that affect their lives. The advocacy service is based on the UNCRC which states that children and young people have a right to express their views and have them taken into account.

### 4.7.2 Involving children in planning their care

The Children (NI) Order 1995 states that a child's wishes and feelings must be taken into account when decisions are being taken and that plans need to be made to ensure children receive care that meets their needs. The CASI survey asked participants about



their experience of care planning to capture their views on being listened to and having their voice heard.

### Key findings – Under 12s

- 62% don't know what their care plan is
- 52% say someone talks to them about the care plan
- 42% are able to tell adults what they think about being in care

Although only a total of 21 children aged 8 to 11 completed the CASI survey, it is surprising that nearly two thirds (62%) of them did not know what their care plan is; only half (52%) reported that someone talks to them about what is in their care plan; and fewer (42%) reported being able to tell adults what they think of being in care.

### Key findings – Over 12s

- 40% know completely about their care plans
- 36% completely agree with decisions with their care plan
- 29% have a copy of their care plan

For the 100 CASI participants aged 12 to 18, only 40% reported completely knowing about the plans made for their care; only just over a third (36%) completely agree with the decisions made as part of their care plan; but less than a third (29%) have a copy of their care plan. It should be noted that perhaps not all of the young people surveyed wanted to have a copy of their plan which may go some way to explaining this finding.

The Children's Care Monitor 2011 asked similar questions about care planning and reported that nearly three quarters (72%) of children who knew they had a care plan also knew what was in it. The same survey reported that 60% of children have a say in their care and 69% of children agree with their care plans. There is a significant difference between these two sets of data. The importance of involving children and young people in planning their care is well recognised and these findings suggest that some young people do feel involved in the process. There are, however, some young people who are or feel disengaged. Effective and best practice should be shared to increase involvement and participation; promote understanding of care plans; and the process of developing them.

### 4.7.3 Supporting young people leaving care

The Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002 outlines the entitlements for young people leaving care. This includes the right to a pathway plan; the appointment of a personal advisor (PA); and support from social services until the age of 21.

#### Key findings – Over 16s

- 39% can talk to their personal advisor about what's happening in their life
- 39% know completely about their care plans
- 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
- 39% don't agree with decisions from the pathway plan

The CASI survey asked participants aged 16 to 18 about their support for leaving care and found that only over a third (39%) felt that they can talk to their PA about things that are happening in their lives.

On the subject of pathway plans, worryingly, only just over a third (39%) completely know about the plans that have been made for their future with almost a fifth (18%) saying that they don't know at all about their pathway plan. Only a third (35%) of participants said that they had a copy of their pathway plan while

a similarly low number (31%) said that they completely agree with the decisions that have been made in their pathway plan. Again, not all of this group may have wanted to have a copy of their own plan. A disappointing 39% of this group reported not really agreeing or not agreeing at all with the decisions made in their pathway plan.

The Children's Care Monitor 2011 asked similar questions of care leavers in England and reported that almost two thirds (64%) rate the support they get as good and 60% of care leavers have a pathway plan.

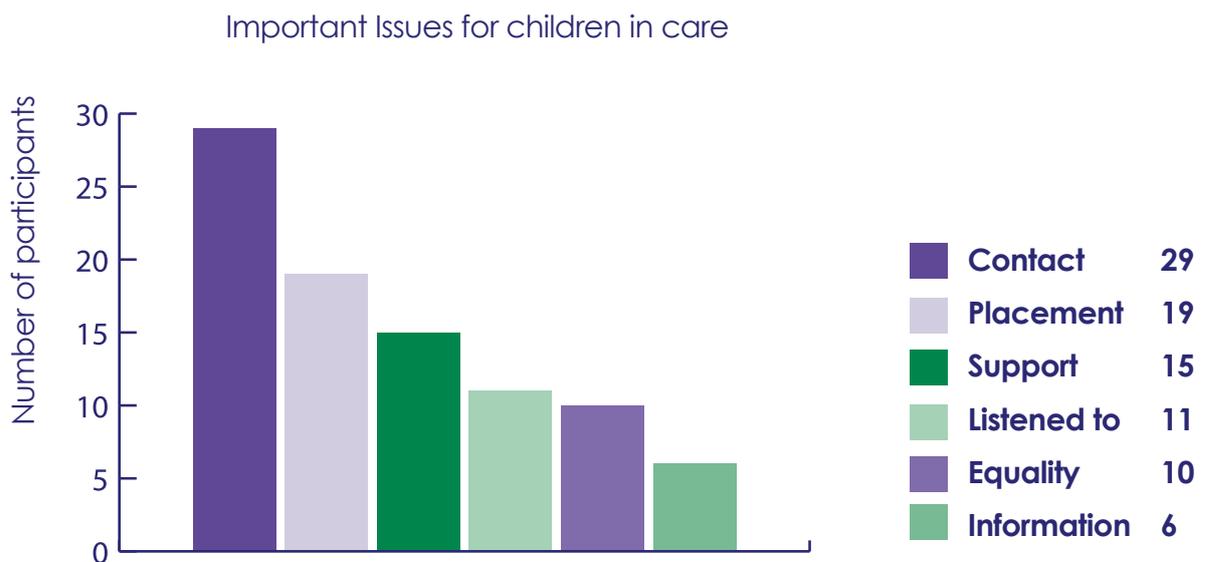
Looking at these two data sets would suggest that more work is needed in Northern Ireland to promote the involvement of young people in developing their pathway plans and in the preparation for leaving care successfully.

## 4.8 The most important issues for children and young people in care

### 4.8.1 Important to young people

The CASI survey asked participants to comment on issues that they thought were of most importance to children and young people in care. This was an open ended question with all responses coming unprompted and directly from the participants.

The responses fall into a number of headings including 'being listened to' and 'having their voice heard'. Issues such as placement, contact, equality and support all featured in the responses.



**Figure 6.** The most important issues for children and young people in care



#### 4.8.2 Keeping in touch – contact for looked after children

The issue of contact with immediate and extended birth family is a major issue for care experienced children and young people.

Having or not having contact with family is also one of the top issues managed by the VOYPIC advocacy service. From January 2008 to December 2010 the advocacy service responded to 62 cases where contact was the primary issue for young people at their initial point of referral.

Contact was the most common issue identified by children and young people who completed the CASI survey as important for all looked after children. One young man put it simply

**“It’s hard being away from your family”**  
Male, 16

The advocacy service recognises that the issue of contact is diverse and have identified key themes in relation to contact which are:

- Parental contact
- Sibling contact
- Extended family contact
- No family contact
- Care experienced parents and contact
- Contact with birth family
- Contact with former residential unit
- Contact with former foster family
- Family group conference
- Supervised and unsupervised contact

Other CASI participants commented on contact with their families and the importance of this to them

**“To see your family; contact is so important”**

Female, 15

**“Knowing where you came from and keeping in touch with family”**

Female, 13

The CASI survey went further and explored contact with the participants and found that over half (56%) are able to keep in touch with their friends and family as often as they like. In addition to this, nearly two thirds (60%) stay overnight with friends and family and the majority (85%) of those who have overnight contact are happy with the arrangements for this.

On the subject of contact, a number of participants voiced their thoughts on returning home to their family. One participant stated they feel it is important for children and young people to know...

**“When they can get home or if they can get home”**

Female, 16

The VOYPIC advocacy service has found that, regardless of the reasons for entering the care system, most children and young people will always want to return home. Helping a child or young person to

understand their individual situation about contact can be distressing for them. The participants of the CASI survey said that they think more needs to be done to manage contact effectively for looked after children and young people.

One participant put it simply expressing that people need to be more aware...

**“How much not being with your parent can affect you”**

Female, 16

The importance of family relationships and managing contact has been highlighted through the CASI survey. It is clear from these findings and personal comments that we need more effective ways of promoting and managing successful contact and addressing the impact being looked after away from home can have on a child's sense of identity.



### 4.8.3 What it's like where I live – care placements

VOYPIC's advocacy service reports placement issues as the top referral reason to the service.

From January 2008 to December 2010 the advocacy service responded to 168 cases where placement was the primary or secondary issue for young people seeking support.

In the CASI survey, placement was identified as the second most important issue for children and young people in care. The participants were able to write in their own words their thoughts and feelings on why this was important.

Placement is not seen as a single issue by the advocacy service but as one that can be broken down into the following categories:

- Placement breakdown
- Multiple placement moves
- Return to family or kinship foster care
- Leaving care
- Specialist placement (hospital, JJC or secure accommodation)
- Homelessness

Several participants felt it was important for children and young people in care to be properly cared for and to live somewhere nice.

Some participants commented on the location of their placement and how this has impacted on them

**“The placement of young people – I am too far away from my family and friends”**

Male, 14

Other participants commented on residential care and the difficulties they have experienced

**“Residential care is the worst place because of the different people coming in and out. It feels like you are in jail”**

Female, 17

**“It’s hard living in a children’s home when it is closing down”**

Female, 16

Several CASI participants took the opportunity to highlight positive aspects of their placement, especially in relation to the support they receive from their foster carers.

One participant said

**“Children in care should have a good foster mummy and good foster daddy like I have.”**

Female, 9

Another participant added

**“Just having someone to talk to and a carer who just won’t give up on you: I have been an idiot to my carers but they still kept me and now I see them as my mum and dad.”**

Male, 15

While the participants of the CASI survey spoke of some of the positive factors of placements, those comments made about residential care and the location of placements highlight the need for further efforts to improve the experience of placements for children and young people in care.

#### 4.8.4 The right support for looked after children and young people

Participants of the CASI survey felt support for children and young people was an important issue. This was raised as a general issue and as a need for support in specific circumstances.

One participant said he felt it was important for children and young people in care to have ...

**“support, friendship,  
love and care”**  
Male, 11

Others put it just as simply and said that it was important to have someone they can talk to.

A significant majority (90%) of CASI participants reported that they have an adult they can trust and 89% had an adult they could go to for help if they had a problem or were upset.

One participant said

**“My foster carer is fantastic  
and I love her as though she is  
my real mum, she accepted  
me into her home and she  
gave me trust when she didn't  
have to. She is amazing and I  
am very fortunate to have  
found her”**  
Male, 17



Support for care leavers was raised by several participants as important. The nature of the support included help with finance, school, independent living and family issues.

One participant recorded that children and young people in care need support for different reasons but more support is needed when coming into care. Another participant added that she felt children and young people in care do not have...

**“proper support  
when you find out  
the reasons why  
you are in care”**  
Female 13



Support in building relationships with social workers was highlighted by several young people. They discussed the need to build trust and how changes in allocated social workers can make this difficult for them.

One participant in relation to his own experience said that in their experience ...

**“Social workers and people who do not know you tell you how to live your life, especially at LAC reviews. All you are to social workers are a file”**

Male 16

Another participant felt that children and young people in care need a ‘good amount of support’ but added that this needed to be balanced with having freedom.

Relationships with social workers were explored with the participants of the survey. Just under half (48%) of those aged under 12 said they found it easy to talk to their social worker and half (50%) of those aged 12 to 18 said they could talk to their social worker about things that were happening in their life. Given the importance of this relationship in the life of a child or young person in care and that social workers are responsible for co-ordinating the care received by looked after children, these low figures highlight the need for relationships between social workers and children and young people to be improved.

#### 4.8.5 Listen to me, hear my voice

The UNCRC states that children and young people have a right to express their views and to have them taken into account.

Several participants of the CASI survey highlighted the importance of children and young people being listened to. One participant said

**“I think it’s important for all young people in care to have a voice and to have a decision in things while they are in care. I feel like most people in care do not really have a voice if they are under 18 and it’s not fair on them. If they had more say in what decisions are being made or what is happening with their care they would be a lot happier”**

Male, 17

The CASI survey asked participants aged 8 to 11 about their views and experience of being listened to. Three quarters (76%) of participants under 12 reported that their social worker helps them to say what they think about being in care. The same number (76%) reported that their social worker helps them to have a say in decisions that are made about their care and over a third (36%) completely agree with the decisions that have been made as part of their care plan. This data suggests that more could be done to engage

young children and support their understanding of care plans.

Of this age group, 42% said they can tell adults what they think of being in care and half (50%) can talk to their social worker about the things that are happening in their lives. One participant added they felt it was important that children and young people in care make sure staff and social workers listen to what they have to say. Another participant added that staff need to be reminded that it is not the child’s fault they are in care.

#### 4.8.6 Fair's fair – equal treatment for looked after children

A number of survey participants felt being treated equally was an important issue for children and young people in care. One participant said it was important to...

**“Try and tear down the stereotype that they are not normal, criminal and people should know that it is not their fault they are in care.”**

Male 17

Other participants discussed their frustration about staying overnight with friends or wanting to do the things that other children and young people get to do.

One participant said children and young people in care...

**“should not be treated any different to children that are not in care”**

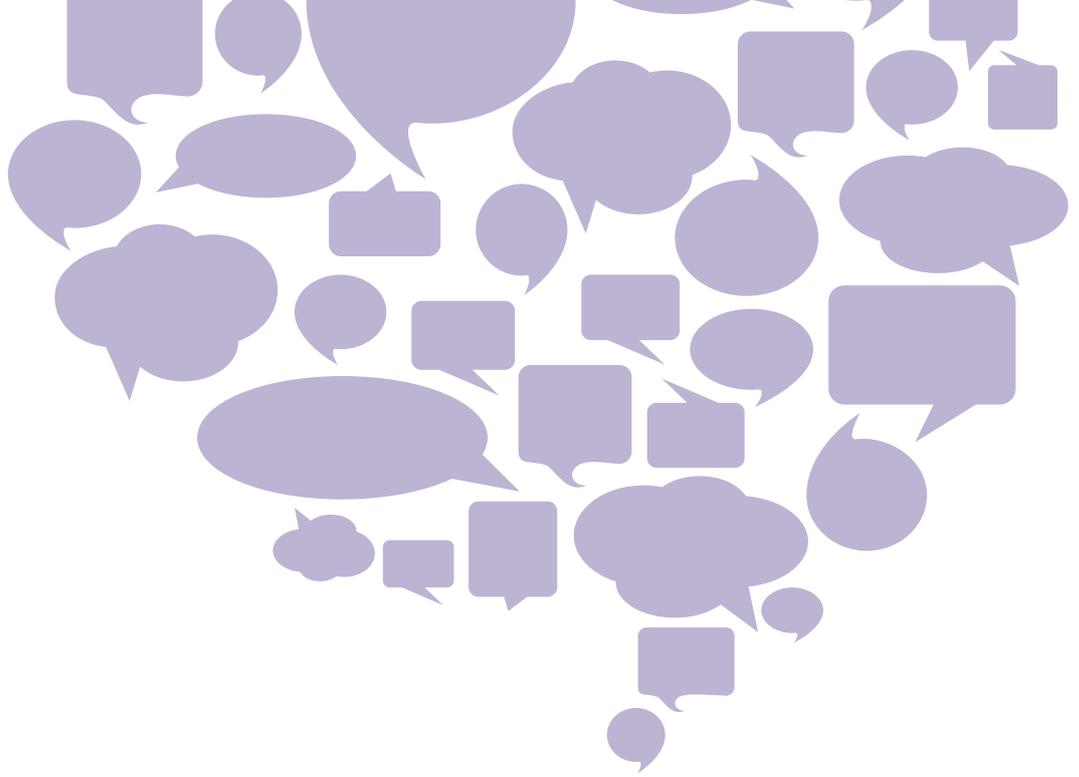
Female 14

Another participant added that children and young people in care

**“should not be outcast because of being in care”**

Female 15

It is clear from the responses that some children and young people in care feel they are treated differently as a result of their care experience. There is a strong wish by children and young people in care to be treated the same as their peers.



#### 4.8.7 Need to know – providing information

The participants of the CASI survey listed information as an important issue for children and young people in care. This was broken down into

- Not knowing why they are in care
- Knowing why they cannot go home
- Too much information being shared at LAC reviews

In the CASI survey almost two thirds (63%) of participants said that their social worker had talked to them about being in care.

Several participants felt it was important for children and young people to know exactly why they are in care. One person added it would benefit children and young people in care to know more about themselves and their own circumstances.

A large number (87%) of CASI participants said that they did know why they are in care; however two thirds (67%) felt they had not enough or nothing at all in relation to a life story book and less than half (47%) felt

they knew enough about their family history. This suggests that more time is required on effective life story work with children and young people to promote a sense of identity.

Several participants identified rules within residential care as an issue. Perhaps children and young people living in residential care need more information about rules and to be involved in making and managing them to promote greater understanding.

Several participants raised the amount of information shared during a LAC review as an issue that is important for children and young people in care.



One participant said

“Their lives should not be so open to social workers and the people who all get to read through the LAC report. Young people should be allowed to read the LAC report on their own before going into the review.”

Male 17

Information sharing is an area that could be improved; it is clear from the CASI responses that sharing information is a sensitive issue for

children and young people in care. They feel too much information is shared at LAC reviews and not enough information is shared with them about their own circumstances.

Those leading LAC reviews should consider what information needs to be shared and if the child or young person's views about the report is reflected at the meeting.

#### 4.8.8 Other stuff that's important

Other responses to the question about what is important for children and young people in care included emotional and practical points.

It is important:

- for children and young people in care to be *happy*
- not to get in *trouble*
- to focus on *career and education*
- to have their *needs met*
- to be *safe*
- to have access to the *internet* in children's residential units



## 5.0 Summary

### 5.1.1 If it's working, do more of it

In 2011, for the first time, VOYPIC used the CASI survey to gather the views and experiences of children and young people looked after away from home in Northern Ireland. Given the small sample of the first survey, it is reasonable to recap on some of the key findings and to wait until future surveys report before drawing any firm conclusions.

This year's findings, however, do provide valuable information on what is working well for children and young people and there is every reason to develop, adopt or expand some of the good practice that is in evidence. With that in mind, let's apply three golden rules to what we've found out from the first CASI survey:

- ✓ If it's not broken, don't fix it
- ✓ If it's working, do more of it
- ✓ If it's not working, change it

We now know what 121 children and young people think of the care system that looks after them in Northern

Ireland. They have responded to questions on a range of subject areas including health, education, safety and rights.

### 5.1.2 Health and wellbeing

On a number of points, we can see from the survey that the experience of young people in care does not differ much from the experience of the general population of young people. It is a challenge for everyone bringing up and caring for children to provide a balanced and nutritious diet and we must all be concerned for young people who have problems or worries about their physical and mental health.

### 5.1.3 Education

This year's survey participants do seem to be active in education and training and report a high degree of attendance and enjoyment with their learning. The education of children and young people in care is, however, key to ensuring successful long-term outcomes and we look forward to hearing more on this issue

in future surveys. It is particularly timely that personal education plans (PEPs) were introduced in Northern Ireland in 2011 just after the survey was completed.

Disruption to children's education is avoided in the best of circumstances so minimising the impact on school life of trauma, placement moves, and other changes in the lives of children in care must be a priority. Worryingly, young people reported spending significant periods of time out of education. This should prompt consideration of policy and practice to secure a prompt and effective return to school or college.

#### **5.1.4 Safety and stability**

A strong sense of safety and stability is reflected in this year's survey with many positive views and comments expressed in support of reported experiences. Many report feeling settled and safe in significant places including where they live, in their neighbourhood and in education.

#### **5.1.5 Community and society**

In addition to feeling safe in local neighbourhoods, we found out that young people in care take part and are active in sport and leisure; school life, and in their communities. This is one aspect that could be developed further with young people in care supported to engage in and contribute to new and rewarding activities and pursuits.

#### **5.1.6 Being involved**

Ensuring that children and young people are, and feel part of, decision making about their life is a challenging and sensitive aspect of their care and support. The findings present a mixed picture when it comes to the experience of being involved in care and pathway planning and suggest that this – one of the most crucial aspects of supporting children through their experience – could be developed and improved.

#### **5.1.7 What's most important?**

Responses to the open question about what's most important for children and young people in care give simple guidance to everyone concerned about the most effective way to deliver support services. The main concerns are familiar ones and all call for more effective policy, procedure and practice:

- Contact with family and friends
- Placement management
- Support, understanding and acceptance
- Information and sensitivity
- Listening and communication

## 5.1.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the aspects of care that are working best for children and young people and which could be developed or expanded are about:

- Feeling **safe and settled** in placement and neighbourhood
- Enjoying **social interaction** with friends, family and school mates
- Enjoying the **support** of one key adult
- Having **photos** of important family and people

It's hard to put it any better than one boy, aged 11 who summed it up



**“support, friendship,  
love and care”**  
Male, 11

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