



Joint Committee on Education and Skills

ABSTRACT

Care Leavers' Network Ireland written submission on children in state care and care leavers: 'Barriers to education facing vulnerable groups'.

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'Care Leavers' Network Ireland is a Peer Led Organization of Adult Who as Children Spent Time in State Care'

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Introduction

In Ireland, there are over six thousand children in the care of the state (figure 1), living away from their birth homes with relatives and foster carers, in residential care homes and special care (in and beyond this jurisdiction). Although, there is currently no data to record the number of care experienced adults living in Ireland we estimate that the numbers would be more than ten thousand. Children can be placed in the care of the state voluntarily or in the presence of court orders. This can be for a multitude of reasons which include, but not limited to; Neglect, Abuse and Abandonment. Children in state care and care leavers often face barriers unique to their peers and many challenges across a range of areas including education.

Care experienced children due to their pathways to care often experience disturbances in the natural progression their peers freely enjoy. Before care, there is often a lack of engagement, poor attendance and quality of attendance can be poor due to the situation at home beyond their control. During care children can face a lack of permanency, be moved around from one foster home to another and barriers as outlined below in accessing and freely enjoying their right to education like their peers. After care again can prompt issues that other children and young adults don't have to face, extensive form filling, obtaining documents from estranged birth family and at time having to seeking documents relating to birth family that have passed away. This vulnerable group compared to their peers are statistically less likely to complete secondary education and up to five time less likely as their peers, to go onto third level education. The Ombudsman for Children office in 2013 commissioned a study entitled; ['Education Of Children In Care In Ireland: An Exploratory Study'](#).

Ironically, many of the gaps in policy identified within are again highlighted below half a decade later. Acknowledging some progress, statistically outcomes for this vulnerable groups are non-existent, the barriers identified below and within this study still effect this cohort of learners. We recommend strongly that a review of this study be conducted to follow up on the implementation of the recommendations within and where warranted, a follow up study to identify what's working for this groups and where the issues lie.

This submission will explore some of these barriers and challenges to give the reader insight into the lived experience of the children of the Irish state and adult who as children spent time in state care. The authors have provided suggested solutions, examples of international practice and policy to provide a solution focused approach to identified issues. It would also be worth noting that in preparation of this submission the voice of care leavers, social workers, young people, relative and foster carers, principals and teachers were obtained by face to face meetings and telephone conversations. This to ensure a topical perspective of identified issues and to provide where possible examples in the form of case studies, based on factual accounts provided to the authors.

Barriers to Education: *An Overview of Topical Issues*

Adopted from Care and Refused a SUSI Grant – 2016

In November 2016, a care leaver made contact via their aftercare worker (Tusla) with Care Leavers' Network Ireland (CLNI) to seek advice and support. Upon completion of their first year and moving into their second year (of four) of their undergraduate university degree course they learned that their SUSI grant application was in fact refused. The grant was refused in year two of their studies due to their adoptive grandparent (RIP) passing and in turn a family home left by way of will to their surviving children (adoptive parent / Aunts and Uncles). This asset was considered as means held by the adoptive parent as part of the SUSI grant process. Strangely, consideration was not made for the applicant entitlements to care leaver status (aftercare allowance, and aftercare support from Tusla). In February 2016, SUSI stated the applicants status as a care leaver was not being accepted as the basis for her receiving the grant. Although, the applicant was considered an 'eligible adult' under the Child Care (Amendment) Act, 2015.

In addition to the above facts, this was a young adult who since the age of one was in the care of the state, a child of the state. Adopted by their long-term foster carers close to their eighteen birthday, a warm and joyous occasion for this care leaver. Before the inheritance, adoption from care, and as a then non-standard SUSI grant applicant there were no issues or refusal as a care leaver. However, because of the grant renewal as an adoptive child the applicant fell into the category of 'dependant' applicant and thus had a standard discourse where the means of the now adoptive parents came into consideration and this caused the application to eventually be denied.

During the process of appeals the care leaver took on two-part time jobs, was studying full time and this had a profound impact on their wellbeing and mental health. Having dreamed of studying their chosen course and it all to be in jeopardy because of the grant refusal. CLNI alongside Empowering People in Care (EPIC) and various other professionals involved provided letters of support to the independent appeals board, after all other avenues of appeal were exhausted, these were submitted late December 2016 some ten months after the grant refusal, a final decision was made in February of 2017 and the grant was only then awarded by the independent appeals board.

This student, self-motivated to better their lives through education was hampered and avoidable distressed because of the prolonged twelve months of limbo. Assessed unfairly within the SUSI grant application process, due to the positive outcome of having been adopted from care.

- **We recommend here the necessary legislative amendments and policy changes be reviewed and amended so students who are adopted from care enjoy the same access to SUSI grants as those who apply while in foster or residential care.**

- **We also recommend having a streamlined process when applying for SUSI grant support, this could form part of an internal memo, the availability of a tick-box on online and paper applications and awareness among SUSI support representatives to the category of applicant: care leavers (foster care, residential care, adoption).**

School Admission Policies – Children in State Care

During the preparation of this submission the authors spoke to school principals, support staff and a foster carer with regards to the experience of children in state care with regards to school admissions. There is currently no national standard on school admission policies for children of the state, this unlike our neighbours in the United Kingdom. [The Department of Education \(U.K\)](#) has given local authorities the power to direct admissions to over prescribed schools with certain conditions attached, this takes away admission refusals and affords 'looked after children' (U.K terminology for children in foster care) top priority in school admissions.

The author upon speaking to a primary and secondary school obtained the following with regards to admission policies and practises; The secondary school we spoke to stated that even when places are taken that they have and continue to work with foster families, who have a birth of fostered child enrolled and even go as far as to work with new families to the school in the case of a child arriving during the school term, placed with a local family. That all efforts are made to accommodate these students. We also spoke to the principle of a primary school and a similar desire and past experiences were highlighted that all efforts have and would be made to accommodate where a space was available.

However, while speaking to a foster carer they outlined the experience of a child that lives with them and how the school where their birth children and another child they fostered attended, the school refused to take the second fostered child on the grounds of not having a space available. The family in question appealed this decision to the BOM, then contacted the Department of Education with the support of the child's social worker, the family also contacted the ombudsman for children's office as they felt this to be a rights issue.

The child was eventually provided a place and enrolled into the same school. This, after a successful S. 29 application and a mediator was appointed. The families concerns were not the additional travel to the child's current school away from the other children it was the fact that this refusal created a barrier to the second child been fully integrated into the family, each morning putting on a different uniform they felt made the child feel as if he was different and this hampered the integration efforts by the family and social worker which was concerning due to the high number of previous care placements this child had.

- **We strongly recommend a national policy for school admissions for children placed in state care, similarly to that on the U.K Department of Education.**
- **Given the feedback from multiple parties involved in the above example, perhaps a circular from the Department of Education and / or Tusla to all schools, would be of benefit to all.**

Consent for SENO Supports and Educational Psychologist Assessments

Upon speaking with learning support teachers, they quickly expressed their concerns at the long delays in obtaining the correct parental / guardian consent required for educational assessments, SNA and SENO support for pupils placed in state care.

Given the cut off dates in the academic year for applications to local SENO's for the allocation of SNA's / Resource hours etc, a child can potentially go from allocated to un-allocated from one school to another as the support rest with each school as opposed to the pupil themselves. There was grave concern expressed by learning support teachers about the needs of their pupils and their sheer frustrations and struggle to at times to 'chase down' social workers for the required consent for pupils.

- **Suggesting here upon admission to care that the removal of any barriers by way of a lack of consent when addressing the educational needs of a child in care.**
- **On a national level, SENO application deadlines become non-applicable to children in care due to the nature and at times lack of permanency within a placement, causing a child to be moved from one community to another and in turn a change in schools.**
- **Funding of educational assessments be covered by the Child and Family Agency, Tusla. This due to the statutory obligations placed on Tusla to provide for the needs of children placed in their care.**

[Taken a Gap Year as a Care Leaver - EPIC](#)

One of the barriers that face young people is they sometimes lack an ability to engage in education straight away after leaving school or their desire to maybe then take a year out / start dealing with their earlier childhood trauma / go travelling as other young people may also do. However, this is not supported currently for care leavers and can sometimes impact the aftercare that they receive if they do not initially engage or it takes them a while to figure out what they want to do etc.

By that stage aftercare may no longer be an option for them or they have 'exhausted' all options that they were meant to take but failed to do. Ideally aftercare support in relation to care leavers should be up until the age of 25 and if they don't engage until they are 23, yes that is their choice but there is still a support there to encourage them to do so. And not that if they don't initially engage they lost their chance! Would a birth child have 'lost the chance' to be supported by their parents because they spent two years figuring out the world and their place in it. CLNI would fully support this contribution by a Care Leaver involved in EPIC and add that we have often seen our peers reach out for supports at 20 / 21 years of age after they 'had it all' and it then crumbled. Pushing people into a discourse of education to be eligible for supports is unfair and doesn't reflect a mutual desire to break the cycle many of these young adults were born into.

- **Suggesting here that amendments be made to aftercare legislation that allows for the full scale of supports to be afforded to care leavers who take a gap year, without the loss of supports and entitlements. Also noting here there would be no additional cost on the exchequer here, merely an accommodation to push out by a year the same supports.**

*[EPIC](#) is a national independent advocacy organization for children and young adults with care experience.

[Cross-Departmental Commitment to Encourage Education Attainment](#)

Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operate the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Scheme, which is often utilized by eligible care leavers wishing to return to education and further their education. As non-standard applicants (i.e. they often live alone and in the absence of the support of birth families) should provisions be made to amend the scheme? as it currently stands to become more efficient and effective in supporting adult learners along their chosen path of study and in turn into employment post qualification. Given the requirements to switch payments during the summer months (outside the academic calendar) and to then sign back on the live register

where recipients are then required to be seeking and available for full time work, which could possible effect the level of SUSI grant aid they received if their income exceed certain limits, in turn becoming a counter-productive practise. Also, the loss of the book grant since October 2012 is a great loss to recipients, this grant often afforded students the opportunity to purchase core text books and those for adapical learning, went on necessities like stationary required during the academic years.

- **Suggesting here that we examine restructuring the BTEA Scheme to include breaks taken by education providers (for example summer time) to afford recipient the opportunities to maintain SUSI grants, gain useful experience in their chosen field of study even on a voluntary basis and allow those who work to earn a limited amount to ease the financial burden of travel, parking, books, course materials, placement requirements and all extra and associated costs with their studies.**
- **Also, to seek a restoration on a phased basis to the book grant which is an integral necessity as part of undertaken further education. This, to also include the purchase of eBooks across different platforms and providers.**
- **To record by way of a tick box on BTEA applications if applicants are care leavers to help drive and inform policy for vulnerable groups, who return to education.**

[A National Scholarships Pathways Scheme for Care Leavers](#)

Care Leavers are poorly represented in third level education and barriers to access, attainment and progression into chosen careers must be enhanced as a mechanism to break the cycle these adults are often born into. Poverty, is often an intertwined factor in the lives of children who experience care and continues into adulthood in the absence of pathways to education and rewarding employment. As outlined in figure 2, we can see a statistical drop in education engagement as early as sixteen years old, this is reflective among non-care experienced students although a lower percentile drops. The environment of a university or institute of technology provide for a vast array of needs; Academic, Social, Physical / Mental Health, Nutrition and Fitness

'More than 75 per cent of care-leavers have no academic qualifications of any kind and more than 50 per cent of young people leaving care after 16 years old are unemployed' ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2004. Routes out of Poverty; P45-46](#))

Currently education providers facilitate Care Leavers by way of access programs and other on-campus supports and services, although largely non-specific. Two examples could be drawn from the access program of [Trinity College Dublin \(TAP\)](#) and more recently launched the [Carlow Access Program with the Institute of Technology Carlow](#), of which our network played an active role in ensuring 'Care Leavers' were represented well and catered for. However, we need to greatly improve, on a national level access, active participation and attainment for care leavers in third level education. Suggesting we consider and act on the following;

- **A National Scholarship scheme to be designed on a non-completive basis for all Care Leavers. To include access, supports and accommodation. Breaking barriers, cycles of disadvantage, through opportunity.**
- **A Departmental curricular to all third level education providers which explains the needs of this vulnerable groups, ways to encourage and support care leavers on-campus and an invitation to include 'Children in Care and Care Leavers' on electronic and paper applications and prospective student materials.**

CPD - Training Opportunities and Active Involvement for Teachers

Upon visiting primary and secondary schools, we asked about training opportunities for teachers and support staff around issues like 'Trauma Informed Practise' and learned that currently Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is largely led by the teachers themselves, no national standard, requirement or funding is set out for this integral part of the teaching profession. Teachers play a massive role beyond academic in the lives of this vulnerable group, often are first recipients of the issues in birth homes, can be that one positive role model to make a profound effect in the lives of children in care and this must be valued, supported and encouraged too. Teachers we spoke to reported feeling 'left out' and 'in the dark' in matters that affect the lives of children in care, case reviews and care planning were mentioned as missed opportunities to make a valuable and insightful addition to the multi-disciplinary teams who support each child in care. Although, it was acknowledged that often a school principle would be called upon in these case, that it was the teachers who had the closest relationships with the children, knew them best and could advocate for them.

- **Teachers and Learning Support staff should be considered as important professional in the lives of children in care and play an active role in multi-disciplinary activities like care planning and case reviews.**
- **A review of the CPD practise for the teaching profession and a national standard be introduced.**
- **CPD opportunities for minority / vulnerable groups in education, for all staff. This to ensure a contextual approach to issues like trauma in the classroom and behaviours associated with same.**

Conclusion

There are many barriers to access and equal enjoyment of education for children in state care, many barriers for care leavers alike. Among these barriers there are many valuable opportunities to learn, to change and to facilitate the identified and presenting needs of these vulnerable groups, under represented among their peers. Upon receiving our request for submission, we were advised the best use of time for the committee is to identify the problems and in turn suggest recommendations, given the time frame we had we taught best to provide a topical insight to issues today, and to focus on tomorrows solutions for these.

We have also obtained a collective voice among care leavers, young people, their careers and many professionals working with and for these vulnerable groups. We ask that the state, the corporate parents to these 6,000 plus children greatly and to their fullest actively support this vulnerable groups. In doing so we are changing lives, saving lives and making a powerfully and fruitful investment in the future of our county. Although some elements of our recommendation may come at a cost to the exchequer, we must focus on the human cost of not investing in this vulnerable groups, possible lost generation through lack of opportunity.

Finally, in the words of the late Mr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela;

'Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use, to change the world'

Appendices

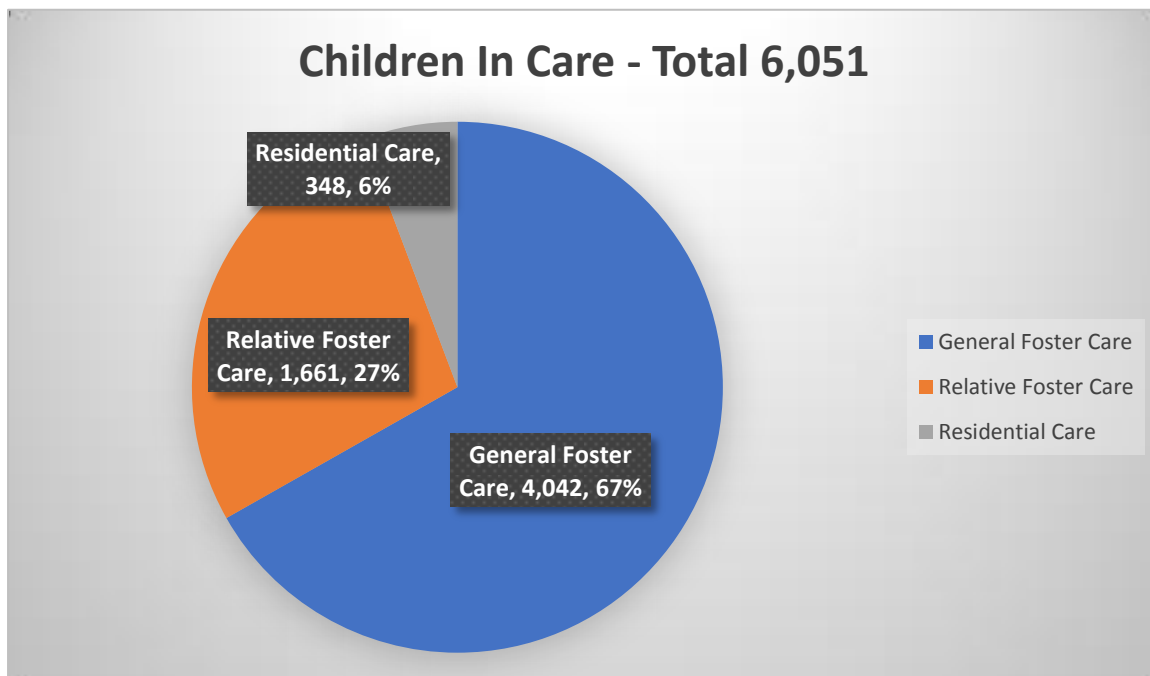


Figure 1 - Source: [Tusla, November 2017](#)

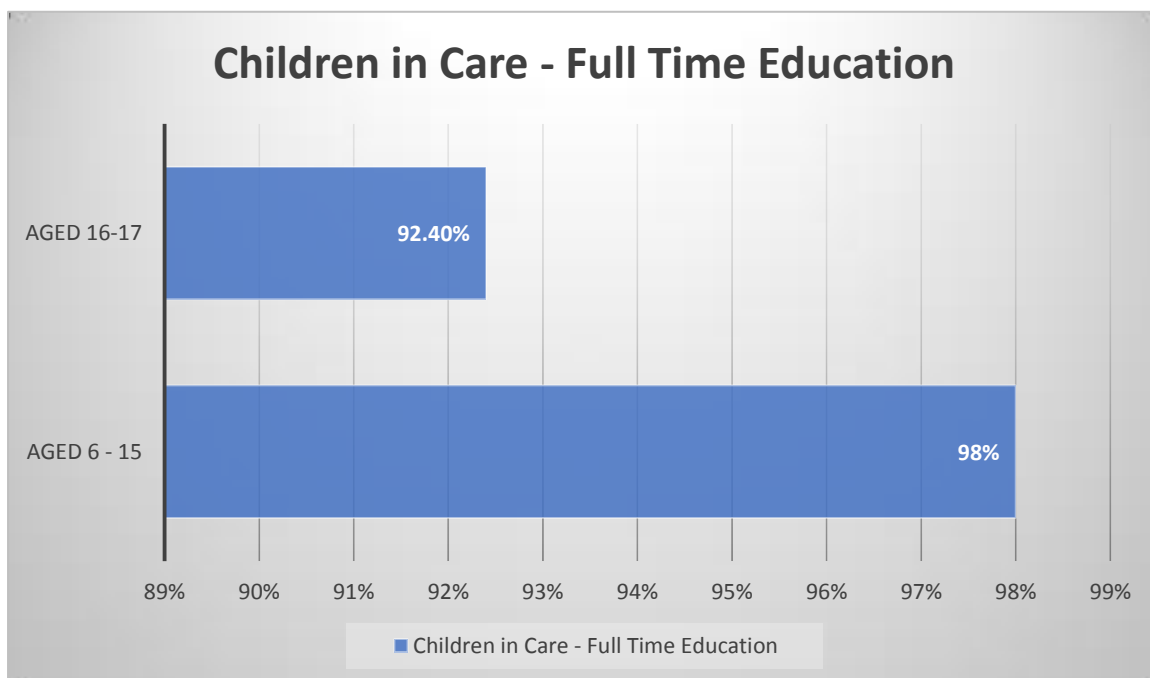


Figure 2 - Source: [Department of Children and Youth Affairs, September 2017](#)