



Care Leavers Network Ireland  
19 Magennis Place,  
Dublin 2.  
29<sup>th</sup> May 2018

### Opening Statement by Wayne Dignam

Dear Ms. Fiona O'Loughlin, T.D and Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today to answer any questions you have regarding our submission to the committee on the topic of 'barriers to education facing vulnerable groups'. I speak to you as a care leaver, someone with direct experience of growing up in foster care and residential care and I am the founder of the Care Leavers' Network, representing approximately 15,000 care leavers in Ireland. We are also developing a European Care Leavers' Network with the support of Erasmus+ European funding, in cooperation with care leavers in England, Italy, Croatia and Romania. Our paper highlighted many difficulties faced by children in care within the educational system, and we propose some measures to improve their outcomes. Children and young people in care have particular educational vulnerabilities - they are more likely to be suspended, more likely to be placed in a special educational setting, more likely to leave school early, to have mental health problems as adolescents and adults, to become unemployed and homeless, and to enter the criminal justice system.

In preparing our submission, we liaised with key stakeholders of the care system, including the Irish Foster Care Association and the Children's Rights Alliance. I am also a member of the 'National Children in Care and the Education System' working group, led by Dr. Paul Downes, Director of the Educational Disadvantage Centre in DCU. This group is currently developing a policy paper on improving outcomes for children in care in the education system. The group consists of members from the National Parents Council, various Universities, homeless charities, teacher trade unions, and children's charities. I would like to thank this group of dedicated people for taking such a keen interest in recognising the need for a coordinated approach to addressing problems faced by children in care. I would also like to thank Shane Griffin, our advocacy manager in the Care Leavers' Network, for his role in developing the submission. Between foster homes and residential units, Shane had 19 placements within the care system. I am delighted that Shane joins me today, as we share our insight and experience with you.

There are approximately 6,240 children in State care in Ireland, which incorporates foster care, relative care and residential care. Less than 10% of placements are in residential care, which are now small units, designed as close as possible to family homes. Many children have harmful life experiences before coming into care, on top of the disruption and uncertainty that comes with being taken into care. Children taken into care typically suffer trauma, tragedy and loss. Like Shane and me, they have had to be removed from their family home by the State, because of their family circumstances such as mental health issues,

[www.careleaversnetwork.com](http://www.careleaversnetwork.com) – [wayne@careleaversnetwork.com](mailto:wayne@careleaversnetwork.com)

**19 Magennis Place, Dublin 2**



neglect, abuse, drug and alcohol addiction. Children in care, and care leavers, experience trauma, loss and attachment difficulties. How could I possibly describe that level of trauma and emotion to you? I presume you have seen the film 'The Wizard of Oz'. This film is one of the best depictions of the feeling of trauma and its long-lasting effects. The tornado that strikes Dorothy's home is symbolic of the trauma she endures. The land of Oz is the feeling of post-traumatic stress disorder, and can often feel like life in the care system, particularly for children with multiple placements and schools. Dorothy lives with an underlying fear and the most ordinary aspects of life in Oz are alien and frightening to her. As for the wicked witch of the west, this is the nightmare, fear and anger that lives within any child or adult who has experienced trauma. It takes a lot of work and support to get through this, and the educational system is the opportunity to allow children to recover from their earlier trauma. But at the moment, it is often only making it worse, as the educational system fails to understand the challenges of children in the care system.

Within national strategies on educational disadvantage and access (such as *the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*) developed by the Department of Education, there is no specific mention of children in care, in spite of their being in the care of the State and being identified internationally as having poorer educational outcomes than their majority population peers. We suggest, therefore, that this committee recommends a **high level national working group** to specifically address the cross-departmental responsibilities of the State to children in care, and to develop a report, within one year, on actions required to improve educational outcomes. This group would have the support of many stakeholders within the care system.

The Ombudsman for Children's Office commissioned a report in 2013, which pointed out that policy-making in relation to children in care needs to be based on evidence gathered systematically from the educational experiences of children in care. To begin with, the creation of a category for children in care on the Department of Education's databases of POD (Primary Online Database) and PPOD (Post-Primary Online Database) would allow the tracking and recording of the objective facts surrounding the education of children in care. As the Ombudsman for Children in 2013 noted: *'the specific deficit highlighted by this current study presents a serious impediment to evidence-informed policy making and practice needs to be addressed if effective policies, procedures and practices are to be put in place to mitigate the barriers to and in education that the literature indicates children in care face.'*(Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2013:4). We recommend a budget allocation to capture the **outcomes of children in care within the educational system** that can inform a strategy and policy development for improvement of educational outcomes.

We also recommend that a **designated teacher** within a primary and secondary school should be a point of contact with the multi-disciplinary team associated with the child in care. This teacher should be trained in areas such as legalities of the care system, attachment, trauma, admissions policies, enrolment policies, and should have an understanding of the challenges faced by foster parents and children in care. For example, children may be taken into care in an emergency situation and may have had more than one or two school placements. They



can be considered siblings of foster carers' children for the purposes of admission. Each school should make a specific plan to support, monitor and review his or her full participation in all aspects of school life, his or her social and emotional well-being and educational outcomes. The Department of Education needs to work with the Department of Children in assigning a budget to this, and issue a circular to schools, with a corresponding training programme and budget for resources such as therapeutic intervention and emotional support. Teachers will need enhanced understanding of the neurological and physiological effects of attachment and capacity to develop a consistent, warm and healing relationship with the child.

In conclusion, the key to supporting the child in care in the education system is shared knowledge and understanding, good communication, and consistent, positive relationships. Teachers are seeking training and support in this area, but the Department of Education and Skills has yet to formally acknowledge its responsibility in relation to this very vulnerable group. Listening to children and care leavers, and their teachers and carers, would then help to develop policies and practices which would support children and young people in care to realise their potential in education. The knock on positive effects will change many lives.