

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris,
TD**

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Marlborough Street, Dublin 1, D01 RC96

18th November 2020

Dear Minister Harris,

Our *Children in Care and the Education System National Working Group* has met over the past three years to identify a range of issues where children in care are being failed by the education system and need key system supports. Our working group membership includes representatives from the INTO, Fórsa, Children's Rights Alliance, National Parent's Council Primary and Early Years, Empowering People in Care (EPIC), Focus Ireland, Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA), Care Leavers' Network, Educational Disadvantage Centre, DCU, Maynooth University, DCU and Maynooth Access Services.

We are writing to you to request a high level national working group to address the cross-departmental responsibilities of the State to children in care, with a specific focus on meeting their holistic educational needs in a coordinated way across all age levels – and to address the current glaring strategic gap in the education system on this issue.

The majority of children in the care of the state (under Tusla) live with foster carers. According to current Tusla figures, there are 6,029 children in care, of which 92.1% were placed in foster care (26.3% of those in foster care being placed in relative foster care). It is estimated that in every primary school in Ireland there is at least one young person in that school who is in care and in every secondary school there are between 4 and 5 young people in care.

Our Working Group has identified a range of key questions and issues for consideration at an official level in your ministry. These key questions and themes include the following:

How can CIC be better recognised as a distinct group as part of a higher education access strategy? If a care leaver takes a gap year, they need to be supported in retaining supports and entitlements, with such aftercare support continuing until age 25. Better supports for their obtaining the Back to Education Allowance Scheme are also required for those over 25. Financial supports for access to third level including through a national scholarship scheme for care leavers as mature students are required. A Department of Education and Skills circular to all third level education providers is required to explain the needs of this vulnerable group to staff. The Scottish Government has recently announced the removal of the 26-years age cap on the care-experienced student bursary in time for the start of the 2020-21 academic year. People with experience of care often do not feel ready to start further or higher education immediately after leaving school –this will support them into either further or higher education at whatever point in life they feel they are ready, regardless of their age.

These are by no means the only issues to be examined in this complex area. It is to be noted that we submitted, through the Care Leavers' Network, some recommendations in the Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education and Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education of May 2019. It is to be highlighted that we consulted with young people in care (through our EPIC Youth Council) around their experiences of the school system while in care as part of the process of identifying key issues. The importance of education for children in care is amplified due to the fact that when children leave care, financial assistance through aftercare services are only offered if the young person is in some form of progressive education.

We are requesting a meeting with you and your officials to discuss these higher education issues and the terms of reference and composition of such a high level cross-departmental national working group.

Looking forward to your response,



Dr Paul Downes

Chairperson, Children in Care and the Education
System National Working Group, DCU Educational
Disadvantage Centre

Susan Carey; Terry Dignan
EPIC (Empowering People in Care)

Wayne Dignam
Care Leavers' Network

Tanya Ward; Saoirse Brady
Children's Rights Alliance

Cathy McLoughlin; Margaret Lamont
DCU Access Service

Kevin Callinan; Clare Keaveney
Fórsa

Alison Connolly; Deirdre Woods
Focus Ireland

Catherine Bond; Anne McCluskey
IFCA

Shane Loftus
INTO

Cáit Ní Murchu
Kilkenny SCP

Áine Lynch
National Parents Council

Bridget Gormley; Rose Ryan
NUIM Access Service

Professor Aislinn O'Donnell; Dr Katriona O'Sullivan; Dr Anthony Malone; Dr Etain Quigley
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