

IRISH AFTERCARE NETWORK

Providing Support to People Working With Care Leavers

31st March 2021

Dear Irish Aftercare Network Member

We are over a year into this new normal that often feels anything but normal. I do sincerely hope everyone is doing ok. The vaccine roll out can't come quick enough and is the light at the end of the tunnel.

The network has adapted its work to continue to meet its member's needs and this newsletter will update you on the productive start to 2021 that the network has had. We continue to advocate and lobby on behalf of our members.

We have made the decision to postpone the provisional May date for the annual conference and will keep you informed should a new date for 2021 be possible in line with Covid guidelines.

Regional network meetings will take place online in May:

- 7th May, Western Region
- 14th May, Leinster Region
- 21st May, Munster Region.

Meetings will take place from 11am – 1pm. Details will be circulated nearer the dates.

The network is always here to support you, please get in touch if we can help in any way or if you have content you would like to share at the regional meetings.

Kind regards

Ciaran Kenny

Ciaran Kenny
Chairman

Irish Aftercare Network News

Meeting with Minister Roderic O'Gorman

The network wrote to the Minister in late June 2020 congratulating him on his new appointment as Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth while also requesting a meeting at his earliest convenience. We continued to communicate with his office in the hope of securing a meeting and were delighted to have the opportunity to meet with him (online) on the 21st January 2021 to discuss further many of the current prevalent issues within aftercare.

Minister O'Gorman acknowledged hugely the work and contribution of our members in these trying times in providing such quality care for so many young people in aftercare throughout the country.

The following issues were highlighted at the meeting and again re-iterated in a follow up letter to the Minister post meeting. Extracts of that letter are being shared with you here.

- **Raising the maximum age for aftercare support to 23 years for all young people in aftercare.** There is a need to raise the maximum age that young people can receive aftercare support from 21 to 23 years of age for all young people leaving care. As discussed, only young people in full-time, accredited education or training are provided with a full aftercare service up to the age of 23, while those young people not engaged in any formal, full-time education or training have their aftercare support withdrawn on their 21st birthday. Our members have continually highlighted that it is the young people who are not engaged in any formal education or training who are often the most vulnerable and tend to have minimal external or family support. They also tend to have had the most difficult childhood experiences, the most unstable care experiences, and have struggled greatly in their transition from adolescence to adulthood. The two-tier system currently in place provides these young people with the least support, withdrawing their aftercare support at 21 years.
- **Housing.** The provision of stable housing for young people leaving care is essential. At present, the lack of housing options for care leavers means a significant number of young people experience homelessness. However, this is not captured in official data and it is widely acknowledged within the sector that the true figure is much higher, primarily because there are no youth-specific services and many young people are afraid to access adult homeless services. Adult homeless services are not suitable to meet the needs of this vulnerable cohort. You agreed at the meeting that this is an issue

that could be addressed in the context of the government's proposed youth homeless strategy. In relation to housing more generally, we acknowledged that the introduction of the Tusla CAS scheme was very positive but that it is not sufficient to meet the housing needs of care leavers. A joint protocol between Tusla and local authorities, which has been in place since 2014, was also discussed. The protocol was intended to improve planning for the housing needs of care leavers. Unfortunately, it has not been effective and should be reviewed. Finally, we were very encouraged to learn that your department is working on a new project that will produce much better data in future. Detailed and reliable data is essential in planning for the future housing needs of care leavers.

- **Mental health and wraparound supports.** As discussed, the challenges facing many young people in aftercare are multi-faceted and complex, often shaped by legacy issues linked to pre-care, in care, and post-care experiences. Our members are seeing a large number of young people coming into aftercare having had multiple placements, experienced high levels of trauma, and presenting with issues around attachment; this group of young people have very mixed experiences of accessing and remaining engaged with mental services. The unfortunate reality is that the system currently in place to assist a young person from moving from child and adolescent mental health services on to adult services has not been positive for many young people in aftercare. The transient nature of many young people in aftercare has seen them have numerous issues relating to waiting lists, lost appointments and an inability to fully identify appropriate follow on services. It is imperative that this small cohort of young people are identified by the appropriate services and are given a clearer pathway to access, and transition safely to, the services they require going forward.

The network hopes to have a further meeting with Minister O'Gorman later in the year.

Irish Aftercare Network Webinar

On February 18th 2021, The Irish Aftercare Network were delighted to welcome back acclaimed clinical psychotherapist and attachment specialist, Joanna Fortune who presented an insightful talk on **"Young adult mental health- Creating an emotionally fluent connection with young adults"**. The feedback we received on Joanna's presentation was incredibly positive and this complimentary webinar, available to members only of the Irish Aftercare Network was a wonderful way for us to connect with our members nationally. Members from all over the country joined us on the day and it certainly was uplifting to gain a better insight into a topic that resonates with so many of us working with vulnerable and complex young people as they transition from aftercare on to independent living. Thanks again to all who joined and while platforms such as zoom have allowed us to put on such presentations for members throughout the Country, we look forward to the time when we can meet members face to face.

Meeting with Director of Services and Integration, Tusla

Ciaran Kenny, Chairman and Neil Forsyth, Communications Officer met with Kate Duggan, Director of Services & Integration, Tusla online on 11.02.2021. A brief discussion took place on the current difficulties working with vulnerable young people, often remotely is having in relation to being able to address day to day issues as well as getting a better sense on how the lock down is affecting all aspects of their lives. The roll out of the vaccine was also discussed regarding those working on the ground directly with young people, as well as the lengthy time it is taking to get aftercare workers vaccinated. A discussion was had in relation to very clear evidence that there are a number of young people in aftercare struggling greatly in their courses during the pandemic. It does appear evident that many young people in full time education and training are struggling due to the fact that most on site supports that were previously available to them are no longer in place given most education and training programmes are now being carried out remotely.

Kate spoke of Tusla acknowledging there is a great need for respite avenues for young people in aftercare and spoke of a number of ways Tusla are looking to further explore options of providing such a service going forward. Kate spoke of the positives around how the Tusla funded project "Way to work" has been received and this will be rolled out now beyond Dublin. Ciaran gave Kate positive feedback regarding his own experiences of "Way to work" and how it has provided many young people in aftercare with opportunities of long term employment.

Kate acknowledged the ongoing housing challenges for care leavers and said she would raise them with the Minister for Housing at an upcoming meeting. Neil agreed to send Kate an overview of these issues and some possible solutions

The network hopes to meet with Kate again in June.

The Covid & Care Leavers Project

Eavan Brady (who is also a member of the IAN committee) and two colleagues from Trinity College Dublin have come together with advocates from Empowering People in Care (EPIC) to learn more about the experiences of care leavers in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Care leavers are one group who may face special challenges due to Covid-19 for example, in relation to accommodation, employment, health, and wellbeing. The pandemic presents a unique opportunity to learn more about the resources care leavers draw on and the stressors they encounter as they face into the challenges and opportunities posed in their daily lives.

By exploring how the pandemic has been experienced by care leavers in Ireland we hope to shed light on the ways in which daily life may have changed for care leavers in this period, how they managed those changes, and how they made sense of their experience. We are ultimately hoping to learn from participants about ways to make life better for care leavers in the future!

We would like to hear from care leavers aged 18-27 about their experiences of life during the Covid-19 pandemic. Anyone who decides to take part in this study will be interviewed online by a member of the research team about their life during the pandemic for about an hour. If you would like to learn more, here are the details of how to contact the research team:

Email: covidandcareleavers@gmail.com

Instagram: covidcareleavers21

Text/phone: 089-2782104

Website: www.covidandcareleavers.wordpress.com

Leaving Well App

Focus Ireland are piloting new software called "Leaving Well" which is a digital alternative to paper-based aftercare plans. First developed in the UK, the app will facilitate engagement by care leavers and ownership of their own development and progress in relation to the implementation of their aftercare plans. Focused on outcomes, the app also makes it possible to collect data on the experience of care leavers by providing real time information on young people that can easily be interrogated and aggregated.

Following research and consultation with an advisory group of experts in the sector, Focus Ireland piloted the app with users of its own aftercare services. The pilot was scheduled for June to December 2020 with a target of 20 participants. The key purpose of the pilot was to learn from the experience of using the app to see how it might work in practice with care leavers and aftercare staff. The pilot was also being used to identify what improvements or developments might need to be made to it to ensure that it could be mainstreamed in Ireland and potentially rolled out widely, beyond just Focus Ireland.

Initial results were very favourable but the pilot did coincide with the start of Covid-19 restrictions, which proved challenging for overall engagement. In order to see how it will work in ordinary times, Focus Ireland plans to start the next phase of the pilot from summer 2021.

Care Day 2021

Overview of the International Celebration of Children in Care

By Irish Aftercare Network Committee Member Edel Weldon & EPIC Advocate

This year EPIC, empowering people in care's #CareDay21 celebrations took place on Friday the 19th of February. Despite the current restrictions, it was wonderful to witness the growth of recognition for what is now our 6th Care Day, and the world's largest celebration of children & young people with care experience. The idea for Care Day itself was developed over a weekend camping trip in Scotland with young care leavers from 5 children's rights organisations from Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland & Wales under the '5 Nations - 1 Voice Alliance'. While discussing their different care experiences, these young people agreed that the public were not fully informed about the care systems in their countries, & that this contributed to their shared experience of stigma, and negative perceptions and stereotypes about children and young people in care and after care. These young adults envisioned a day that would highlight the achievements and celebrate these children & young people, while also educating the public about the care system itself. They believed that this might address some of the misconceptions the public may have, while also improving their understanding of the obstacles these young people can face. Another primary objective of Care Day was to create a sense of community across the world for those with care experience, to help children and young people support each other and be proud to declare themselves a #CEP – Care Experienced Person.

The 1st Care Day was celebrated initially in the 5 countries mentioned previously, coordinated by EPIC in partnership with TUSLA & supported by what is now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth, & the Ombudsperson for Children's Office. Since then, Care Day has become globally recognised with Holland, Finland, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, Croatia & Italy joining the celebrations, & it even caught the attention of Zimbabwe!. EPIC's National Youth Council continue to play a large role each year in organising the celebrations & platforms promoting Care Day across Ireland & have used their own voices by doing media interviews, including with the Irish Times, Newstalk & The Late Late Show to highlight the message of Care Day & to raise awareness of care related issues.

EPIC's promotion of Care Day has previously included developing celebratory packs for children and young people in care, & encouraging carers to celebrate the day with their children and young people by hosting different activities. EPIC also facilitates various national events including presentations to universities, and partners with a wider network of organisations who support Care Day. In recent years our own IAN Chairperson, Mr. Ciaran Kenny of Don Bosco Care, took part in organising soccer blitzes in Dublin in support of Care Day between Don Bosco, Crosscare, EPIC & SARI. Regional Tusla areas have also held their own local celebrations on the day and Care Day continues to be supported by DCEDIY, Tusla and a range of politicians, as well as the Ombudsperson for Children, and multiple organisations such as Care Leavers Ireland, academic institutions & well-known music & sports personalities and of course the Irish Aftercare Network and its members.

This year, due to Covid-19 restrictions, we organised our first ever virtual Care Day in partnership with Tusla and supported by DCEDIY, which included online activities such as bake-offs, art & writing competitions for a range of ages, receiving over 90 entries, a children's scavenger hunt, a 5 Nations 'Link Up' game & a Netflix movie night! EPIC also hosted a series of Webinars on the week of Care Day for young people, professionals, academics, and others under the theme "Equality through Equity." The webinars focused on the intersection of care and other issues, including LGBTI+ rights, Race & Ethnicity, Education, Disability, Justice, & Accommodation. Each Webinar was recorded & can be viewed on EPIC's YouTube channel, including a piece on the CAS Housing scheme for care leavers.

#CareDay21 was also trending on social media with people all over the world sharing their support through videos and photos, including the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman and CEO of TUSLA, Mr. Bernard Gloster.

We wish to thank everyone who participated in Care Day events & celebrated it in their own way, & we hope to be able to celebrate with more of you in person next year for #CareDay22!!



[Review of SUSI grant scheme](#)

The network wrote to Minister Simon Harris on 15th March in response to the recent call for input on the SUSI grant system. The networks submission focused on three areas.

1. Stamp 4 Visa / Nationality

2. Mental Health Discretion

And

3. Designated liaison officer to correspond with Aftercare Workers.

We received the following response and will keep members informed should there be any further follow up. “We would like to confirm receipt of your input to the Department and Indecon on the review of the student grant scheme, and to thank you for taking the time to make this submission. Your input will be considered carefully alongside other inputs in conducting this research”



We would like to take this opportunity to wish all our members a very Happy Easter. Until then take care and enjoy the Easter break.

***Reminder: Regional network meetings will take place online in May.
Further details to follow.***