Children in Northern Ireland

Department of Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk

Department of Health
An Roinn Sláinte
Männystrie O Poustie
www.health-ni.gov.uk

The Life YOU Deserve

A PLAN ABOUT CARING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

TEENAGE VERSION

Who is the plan for?

The plan is for care-experienced children and young people.

That means all children and young people in care - living with foster carers, or in a children's home, or in supported accommodation or lodgings, or living with parents who get extra help.

It also means those who might need to come into care because their families find it hard to cope, or those going back home after a short period in care, or those who are leaving care to make their own way in the world, or who have left care but still need some support.

Who made the plan?

The Department of Health is in charge of everything to do with health and social care in Northern Ireland - it is also the Department responsible for looking after children and young people who are care-experienced.

The Department of Education is in charge of schools. Its job is to make sure that every child and young person in Northern Ireland gets the chance to do well at school and, of course, that includes those who are care-experienced.

The Departments got together to make a plan to support care-experienced children and young people.

We talked to a lot of people about how we could make things better for children and young people in care - including you, through VOYPIC, Fostering Network and other organisations.

We are very grateful to the children and young people who told us their stories and gave up their time to help us produce this plan.

What will the plan do?

The plan is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, so it will make sure that care-experienced children and young people enjoy the same rights as other children and young people.

Children and young people with a disability also have rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and so the plan will make sure care-experienced children and young people with disabilities are treated equally.

The plan is to make sure that you get the help you need to be the best that you can be.

Those in charge of making the plan happen will act like the very best parents - they will keep you safe and always do what is best for you.

Why do we need a new plan?

Facts and figures tell us that:

- **3,383** children and young people are in care - this is the highest number in 25 years
- **43%** of them come from the poorest areas in Northern Ireland
- **12%** of children in care have a disability (physical or learning)
- **40%** of children in care live in a foster care arrangement with family or friends
- **27%** of care leavers aged 19 are not in education, training or employment
- **Overall 1.4%** of children are suspended from school - that figure is five times greater for children in care
- Of all children who end up in custody - **39%** have been in care
- More care leavers **aged 18** are continuing to live with their foster carers
- Just over half of primary schools **(52.1%)** and over three quarters of post primary schools have care-experienced pupils
- Care-experienced children get fewer GCSEs **(34.4%)** than other pupils **(71.0%)**

While there have been many improvements in how we have been supporting you in recent years, the evidence shows that some of you are not doing as well as other children and young people.

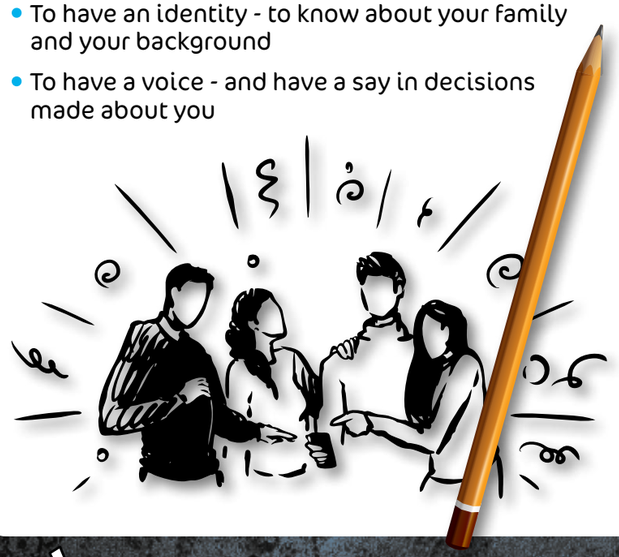
This plan sets out to change that.

Your Rights

Care-experienced children and young people should enjoy the same rights as other children and young people.

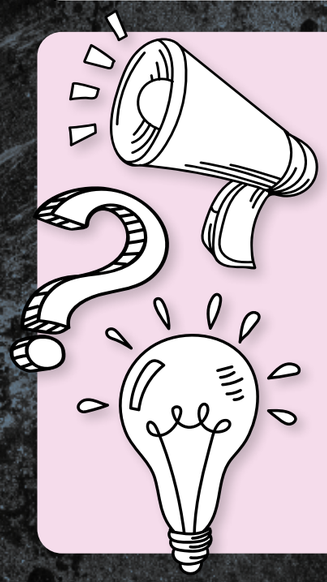
You have the right:

- To learn about and understand what your rights are
- To have an identity - to know about your family and your background
- To have a voice - and have a say in decisions made about you



YOU TOLD US

- "Children should be able to speak up for themselves, but it would be good to have someone to be the adult."
- "I don't go to them (Reviews) as they are boring and I don't understand."
- "Reviews have been good for me - they have been sweet. I've a good relationship with my social worker."
- "I always wanted a say in my care plan. I have a 5 year plan and I did it with my youth worker."

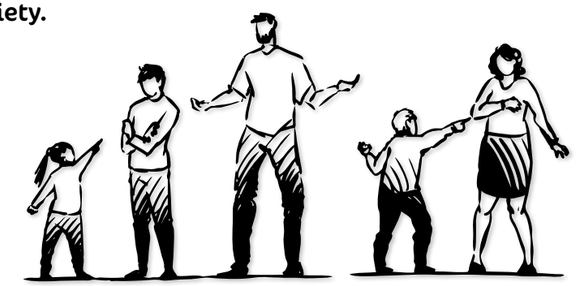


ACTION PLAN

- We will look at how we can improve Looked After Children reviews, we will ask you to help us with this.
- Every 2 years we will ask everyone involved, including you, to tell us what they think of care. We will make changes based on what we hear.
- We will make a law that says you can make complaints and have someone speak up for you - this will include those of you who have been adopted.
- We will make a law that Health and Social Care Trusts must set out what services they offer to you when you have left care.
- We will make a law that Health and Social Care Trusts must set out how they will make sure they are being good parents to you.

Being equal and getting along

Care-experienced children and young people should have the same opportunities as other children. They should not be treated unfairly or be looked down on by the rest of society.



- Research shows that bad experiences, like abuse, can affect children for many years.
- Children coming here to get away from wars in their own country may be separated from their families and suffer a lot.
- Carers need to learn how to support you if you have had very tough experiences.
- It helps when health and education staff work together to support both you and the school you go to.
- We need specially trained foster carers to care for children and young people with additional needs and to make sure they get the same chances as other children and young people.

YOU TOLD US

- That carers need to be more aware of how to support young people who are struggling with their sexuality.
- "I should have the same opportunities as everyone else."

ACTION PLAN

- We will make sure that professionals learn how to work together to help those who have had bad experiences in childhood.
- We will train social workers to help families learn how to keep their children safe and make sure they get the same chances as other families.
- We will train more specialist foster carers to support children and young people with additional needs.
- We will review training for carers around LGBTQ issues - this will be based on young people's experience.

Your Health

Care-experienced children and young people should enjoy the best possible physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing. Children with disabilities should have the care and support they need to lead full and independent lives.

- If you have enough understanding you should be able to refuse a yearly medical examination. Instead you should be able to go to the doctor when you need to - like any other child.
- If you have a disability you should have detailed health plans - particularly when you are moving into adult services.
- If you are leaving care you should have plans in place to support your physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing, well before you leave care.
- If you have a disability you and your family should have a wide variety of choices for breaks - and this should not mean that you have to go into care during the break.
- Care-experienced children and young people can be at more risk of mental ill-health.

- That you are frustrated by the delays in being seen by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.
- How isolated some of you feel when leaving care - and how this can affect your mental health.
- “My carer has ‘hug time’ every day and I really like this.”
- “I don’t like people thinking they can poke and prod me (in medical).”
- “I waited 8 months to get help and support (with my mental health).”

ACTION PLAN

- We will introduce an all-round health check-up for you.
- We will make a plan about how we deliver services about your emotional health and well-being, to make sure that you get the help you need from organisations across Northern Ireland.
- We will have new workers who link up Children’s services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and Disability Services.
- We will make a new law that children with disabilities, who have a short break, do not have to be treated as if they have been taken into care in order to receive this service.
- Health and Education workers will focus on emotional health and wellbeing in schools.

Being Safe & Settled

All children and young people must be protected from all types of abuse, injury and neglect.

We want to make sure that all care-experienced children and young people have somewhere safe and settled to live.

- It is not good for you to move a lot from place to place.
- We need different types of places for you to live in - so that we can meet your needs.
- Too many care-experienced children and young people come into contact with police and the courts. This can affect their whole lives.

- That good accommodation is the most important thing in making you feel safe and secure.
- That police are sometimes called for small things that normally parents would deal with.
- “It’s good to be able to stay somewhere long-term.”
- “I had 14 social workers by age 19.”
- “Some children’s homes are long-term and some short-term, I think that long-term is better, to be able to build relationships.”
- “They have a flat inside the home to help you learn about how to look after yourself before you go to supported accommodation. You need most help after you turn 16. I’m going to supported living soon and they will let me be in the flat for a while.”

ACTION PLAN

- We will bring in new laws to make sure you are safer and to make sure you get more of the right support.
- We will improve support for families.
- We will have teams to support you if you live in a children’s home.
- We will put money into creating better places for you to live in.
- We will look at the number and types of staff we need in the future.
- We will look at how we can get more foster carers.

Learning

Care-experienced children and young people should have an enjoyable experience of school and should be supported to achieve as much as other children.

- Carers should play a part in your education and help you with homework.
- Health and education staff must work together to make sure you have every chance to do your best.
- You must have your own education plan.
- You should be able to take part in after school activities.
- You should be encouraged and supported to continue your education for as long as you can.

YOU TOLD US

- "My teacher is very kind to me because they understand."
- "Everyone learns differently."
- "I don't want people to know what happens at home / that I'm in care."
- "Teachers don't understand the demands of contact and other meetings."
- "I would like an after-school club with other young people in care and to not be judged."

ACTION PLAN

- We will provide you with the support you need to enjoy and do well at school.
- We will help those working in education to understand the lives of care-experienced children and young people.
- We will make sure that your education plan is working.
- We will support you to take part in after school activities.
- We will make a law to support you to continue in, or go back to, education or training until you are 25.

Play

All children and young people should have the time and space to enjoy rest, play, sports, leisure and arts and cultural activities.

Care-experienced children and young people should have these activities written into their care plans.

- Safe access to PC games and the Internet can help you with relationships, skills and learning.
- School trips can be an important part of your life.
- Carers should help you with transport to activities - especially if you live in a rural area.
- You should be asked what fun activities you would like to do.

YOU TOLD US

- "We need this (the internet) for homework and socialising, it's a basic need now."
- "There should be more opportunities for day trips and activities."

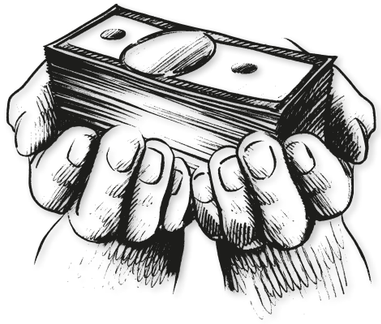
ACTION PLAN

- We will make sure that children's homes have the internet.
- We will work with colleagues to make sure you can get the most out of facilities in country parks.
- We will work with colleagues to make sure that you and your carers have access to places for play and leisure.

Work & Money

All children and young people should be able to have enough money to live on.

Care-experienced children and young people may need extra support to plan their future lives when they leave care.



- We need to take time to make a plan about what happens when you leave care.
- Where possible you should have a trial period of living independently before it happens for good.
- You should get practical help to learn how to manage money, cook, clean and run your own home.
- You should have a choice about where you will live and get help to find work or stay in education.

YOU TOLD US

- That you can feel vulnerable and isolated when your situation changes suddenly at 18.
- "We need more long-lasting support as we do not have a family support network to fall back on."
- "Being responsible for so much at a young age can contribute to debt"
- "Help with budgeting plans would be good."
- "Some people suit it (supported accommodation) as a stepping stone and need it, but then they can become too dependent on it and when you move out you are lonely and can't cope."
- "You need positive relationships with people in life."

ACTION PLAN

- We will make new laws to support you until you are 25 and will help more of you to stay with foster carers, if that is what you and carers want.
- We will work with others to provide more accommodation options when you are leaving care.
- We will provide flexible services to support you when you feel vulnerable in the evening or at weekends.
- We will work with you to look at how we support you and how this can be improved.
- We will look at providing work placements, in the Civil Service, for care leavers.

Being Positive

Care-experienced children and young people should be valued for what they can bring to their communities.

- We need to help the public understand more about care-experienced children and young people and help them to learn about the challenges and difficulties you have faced.
- We need to treat you with the respect you deserve - for example how we talk about you or describe you in reports.
- We need to help you have confidence and feel good about yourself.

YOU TOLD US

- That you don't want to be written off as 'care kids', and that negative attitudes and images should be challenged.
- "I was badly judged, oh she's in care, she's not fit for life, all she wants to do is party."
- "We are looked down on by the community, we get blamed for everything."
- "You could use soaps and dramas, and use young people in care to promote good news stories, positive role models."

ACTION PLAN

- We will take steps to help the public understand care-experienced children and young people better, and challenge any bad attitudes they might have about you.
- We will support things, like Care Day in Northern Ireland, that give a positive image of you and other care-experienced children and young people.

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