

INFORMATION
ANALYSIS
DIRECTORATE



Northern Ireland Care Leavers 2020/21



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Reader Information

Theme	Care leavers in Northern Ireland
Document purpose	To provide information on outcomes for children who have left care in Northern Ireland.
Reporting period	1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021
Authors / statisticians	Heidi Rodgers and Jessica McCluney
Publication Date	16 February 2022
Issued by	Community Information Branch Information & Analysis Directorate Department of Health Stormont Estate, Belfast, BT4 3SQ, Northern Ireland Tel 02890522580 Email cib@health-ni.gov.uk Department of Health Care Leavers publications
Target Audience	Directors of Children’s Services, Chief Executives of Boards and HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland, health care professionals, academics and social care stakeholders.
Main uses of document	The main uses of these data are to monitor the delivery of social care services to children, to help assess Trust performance, corporate monitoring, to inform and monitor related policy, and to respond to parliamentary/assembly questions. The bulletin is also used by academics/researchers, the voluntary sector and those with an interest in children in care.
National Statistics	The United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA) has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.
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Price	Free

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The statisticians within IAD are out posted from the [Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency](#) (NISRA) and the statistics are produced in accordance with the principles and protocols set out in the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#).

IAD comprises four statistical sections: Hospital Information, Community Information, Public Health Information & Research and Project Support Analysis. This publication is produced by Community Information Branch.

About Community Information Branch: The purpose of Community Information Branch (CIB) is to promote effective decision making in children and adult social services by providing quality information and analysis.

We collect, analyse, and publish a wide range of community information that is used to help monitor the delivery of personal social services policy. Information collected by CIB is used to assess HSC Trust performance, for corporate monitoring, policy evaluation, and to respond to parliamentary/assembly questions. All publications can be found on the [Department of Health's website](#).

Our Vision and Values

- Provide up-to-date, quality information on children and adult social services and community health;
- to disseminate findings widely with a view to stimulating debate, promoting effective decision-making and improvement in service provision; and
- be an expert voice on social care information.

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Key Findings

There were 332 care leavers **aged 16 to 18** in 2020/21

- Some two thirds (67%) of care leavers aged 16 to 18 had GCSEs or other qualifications. The proportion of care leavers who had 5 GCSEs (A*-C) or higher at the time of leaving care was 29%.
- Care leavers continue to have a higher proportion of young people with a Statement of Educational Need (20%) compared with the general school population (5%).
- Of the care leavers aged 16 to 18 in 2020/21, for whom information was available, 74% were in full time or part time education, training or employment. Some 15% were unemployed and 11% were economically inactive because of caring responsibilities or illness/disabilities.

There were 238 care leavers **aged 19** in 2020/21

- Some 95% of care leavers aged 19 were in contact with Health and Social Care Trusts; with 74% in contact at least once a month.
- Some 67% received some form of ongoing support from social services, including support for higher education and accommodation.
- Of the care leavers for whom information was available, 70% were in education, training or employment – a slight decrease from the previous year.
- In terms of becoming a parent, 10% of all care leavers aged 19 were parents, with equal numbers of female and male care leavers aged 19 becoming parents on or before their 19th birthday.

1. Northern Ireland Care Leavers

1.1. BACKGROUND

Children are taken into care for a variety of reasons, the most common being to protect them from abuse or neglect. In other cases their parents could be absent or may be unable to cope due to disability or illness. Children who become looked after by the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust have often suffered many disadvantages in their lives and many of them attain low educational achievements which are likely to impact on their future lives and chances for employment.

The *Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002* came into force in 2005. It aims to improve the life prospects of young people who are looked after by HSC Trusts as they make the transition to independent living and become care leavers. To achieve this, the Act placed enhanced duties on HSC Trusts to support young people who are leaving care.

The main aims of the Act are to prevent premature discharges from care, improve preparation, planning and consistency of support for young care leavers, and to strengthen arrangements for financial assistance. Central to the Act are duties to assess and meet individual's needs, provide Personal Advisers and develop pathway planning for young people up to the age of 21 (or beyond if they are continuing in education)¹.

Standards for Leaving Care Services in Northern Ireland were published by the Department of Health in 2012 which establish minimum standards for leaving and aftercare services. The Standards specify the arrangements, services and procedures that need to be in place and implemented to ensure the delivery of quality services for young people leaving care and to support them in education, employment and training. These Standards apply to HSC Trusts and those other agencies commissioned by a HSC Trust to deliver leaving and aftercare services.

The *Going the Extra Mile (GEM) scheme*² was launched in 2006. The aim of this scheme is to promote continuity and stability of living arrangements in post-care life for young people living with foster carers by ensuring that financial support is available to assist carers to continue to meet the care, accommodation and support needs of these young people until they reach the



¹ The Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 set out in more detail the matters to be taken into account by HSC Trusts when assessing and meeting the needs of those preparing to leave care and those who have left care.

² The scheme is facilitated under the Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002, the Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (NI) 2005 and Volume 8 of the Children (NI) Order 1995 Guidance – Leaving and Aftercare.

age of 21. Allied to this, the scheme also aims to promote better outcomes for young people leaving care in relation to training, employment and education.

The Department recognises the importance of giving young people the best start in life, helping those in need, and in particular improving outcomes for children and young people in care. The Programme for Government initiative is currently being reviewed but any ongoing population target on improving Support for Looked After Children related measure will continue to be reported on annually.

1.2. OC COMMUNITY INFORMATION RETURNS

The community information returns OC1, OC2 and OC3 collect data relating to children in care and care leavers in Northern Ireland, which together are designed to monitor and assess outcomes for children while they are in care and after leaving care. The OC1 return collects information on educational attainment of care leavers aged 16 to 18, the OC2 return collects information relating to the educational qualifications and health of children looked after continuously for 12 months and the OC3 return collects information on the economic activity of care leavers aged 19. This bulletin reports findings from the OC1 and OC3 returns relating to the year ending 31 March 2021.

1.3. CARE LEAVERS

Children admitted to care may be discharged, if appropriate, at any age. *Care Leavers* in this bulletin cover young people aged 16 to 18 who left care during the year ending 31 March 2021 as well as young people who turned 19 years of age during the year ending 31 March 2021 and who had been looked after on 1 April three years previously. It excludes those young people who had been looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (respite care).

Due to the small number of care leavers in Northern Ireland, some caution should be taken when interpreting figures presented in this bulletin, especially when the figures are broken down into sub categories. It is also worth noting, when comparing yearly figures, that each year has an individual cohort of young people which may differ in characteristics to other years. For example, a given year may include a higher number of young people with special educational needs which could impact on the educational attainment figures for that year. As such, yearly variations in outcomes may be a reflection on the different cohorts of people in addition to actual trends or social care intervention.

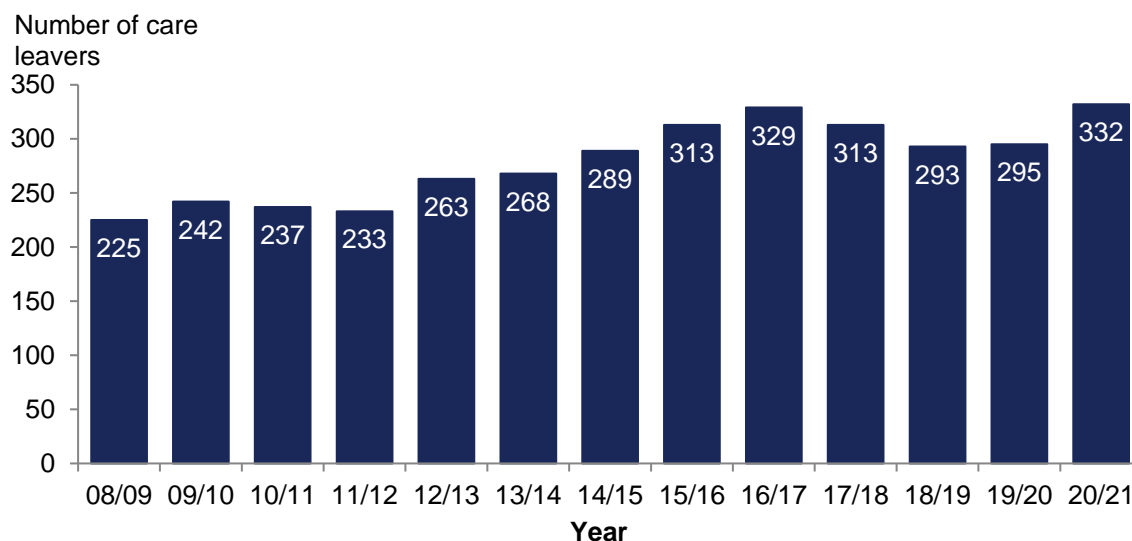
2. Care leavers aged 16 to 18

2.1. WHO ARE THE CARE LEAVERS AGED 16 TO 18?

During the year ending 31 March 2021, 332 young people aged 16 to 18 left care in Northern Ireland, a 13% increase from 2019/20. The number of care leavers steadily increased between 2011/12 and 2016/17, after a period of relative stability in the preceding years and has stayed around 300 the last years.

There were fewer female than male care leavers in 2020/21 (44% and 56% respectively). This breakdown is slightly inflated compared to the general population of that age group in Northern Ireland, (49% female and 51% male)³.

Figure 1 Number of care leavers aged 16 to 18 in Northern Ireland (2008/09 – 2020/21)



³ [2020 Mid-Year Population Estimate](#) (NISRA 2021).

Table 1. Care leavers aged 16 to 18 by Health and Social Care Trust (2020/21)

HSC Trust	Number of care leavers	Numbers change from last year	Proportion of all care leavers in NI
Belfast HSC Trust	86	+4	26%
Northern HSC Trust	63	+8	19%
South Eastern HSC Trust	47	+/-0	14%
Southern HSC Trust	54	+8	16%
Western HSC Trust	82	+17	25%
Northern Ireland	332	+37	100%

As in previous years, Belfast and Western Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts had the highest number of care leavers aged 16 to 18 (26% and 25% respectively of all the care leavers). The number of care leavers in each HSC Trust can vary year on year, and all Trusts, with the exception of the South Eastern HSC Trust, saw increases in numbers of care leavers aged 16 to 18 between 2019/20 and 2020/21.

The care leaver's individual geographical location was linked with the [Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017](#)⁴ to identify the deprivation quintile rank of home location before last entry into care and after leaving care⁵. For the young people where geographical information was available⁶, a slightly higher proportion had been living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland before the last entry into care (41%) than after leaving care (37%). Further analysis showed that just under half (47%) of the care leavers were living in an area of same deprivation rank when leaving care as before last entry into care.

2.1.1. Age Profile

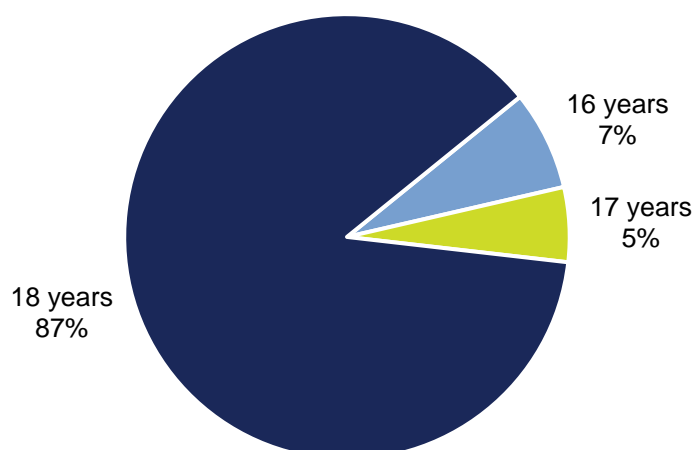
As in previous years, the majority of care leavers in 2020/21 had stayed in care until they reached the age of 18 years of age (87%), while some 13% left care at 16 or 17 years of age. At HSC Trust level, there was some variation in the age profile of the care leavers, with the proportion of young people leaving care at 18 ranging from 83% in the Belfast and South Eastern HSC Trusts to 94% in the Northern HSC Trust.

⁴ Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017.

⁵ These analyses were only carried out for care leavers with Northern Ireland geographical location.

⁶ Northern Ireland geographical information prior to entering care was available for 82% of the care leavers and information was available for 85% upon leaving care. Information was supplied for 74% of the care leavers for both prior to entering care and after leaving care.

Figure 2 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Age of care leavers (2020/21)



2.1.2. Religion and Ethnicity

Information on religion and ethnicity of care leavers is collected for equality monitoring purposes. There were lower numbers of care leavers from a Protestant community background (33%) than a Catholic community background (48%) in 2020/21, with 5% originating from Muslim community background and a further 14% from 'Other' denominations, including those with no religion, or whose religion was unknown.

The vast majority of care leavers in 2020/21 had a White ethnic background (87%). This is a 10 percentage points decline in comparison to the figures recorded in 2017/18 (97%). Of those with non-white ethnic background, 5% were Black, 2% were Irish or Roma Travellers, and the remaining 6% were of other ethnic backgrounds.

2.1.3. Disability

Having a disability can have an impact upon a person's life chances. People with disabilities can suffer from multiple disadvantages, being more likely to live in poverty, less likely to have educational qualifications and more likely to be economically inactive. Of the care leavers in 2020/21, 14% (47) had a disability. Of these, close to half (23 young people) had a learning disability and 18 were on the autistic spectrum⁷.

There are no directly comparable disability figures for this age group for all of Northern Ireland, however; the [2011 Census](#) reported that just over 6% of all young people of this age (16 to 18) in Northern Ireland had a long-term limiting illness. Furthermore, 5% of 16-17 year olds received a Personal Independence Payment in August 2020⁸. These comparisons

⁷ Please note that some of the children had multiple disabilities. For example, a small number of the children with a learning disability may also have autism.

⁸ Figures supplied by the Department for Communities – Personal Independence Payment is a new benefit replacing Disability Living Allowance.

continue to suggest that a disproportionate number of young care leavers are living with disabilities.

2.1.4. Special Educational Need

Children have special educational needs if they have a difficulty which calls for specific educational provision to be made for them. Further definitional and background information on this is detailed on the [Department of Education for Northern Ireland website](#).

Two in six care leavers in 2020/21 (20%) had a statement of Special Educational Need, a lower proportion than that in 2019/20 (23%). Although not directly comparable, 5% of school leavers in Northern Ireland had a statement of Special Educational Need in 2019/2020⁹. This suggests that a disproportionate number of young care leavers have specific educational needs compared with the general population.

⁹ [DENI, 'Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers 2019/20'](#).

2.2. WHAT WAS THEIR LAST PERIOD IN CARE?

2.2.1. Legal Status

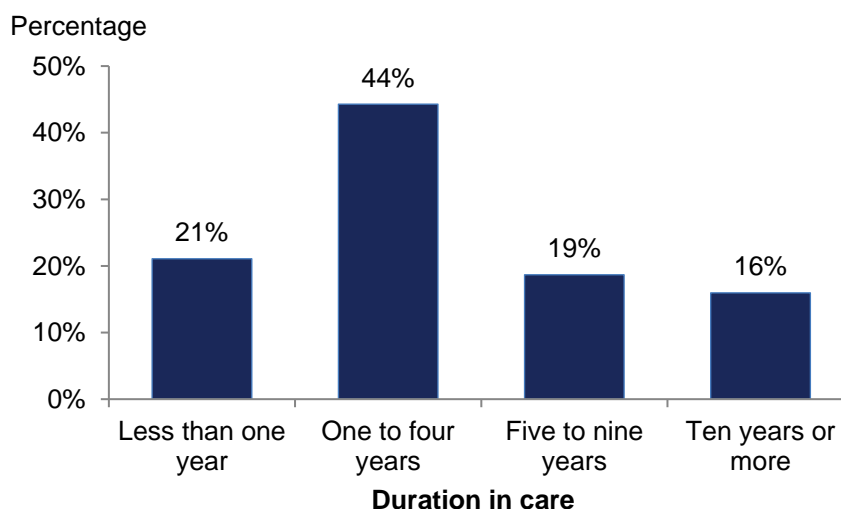
In regards to the legal status¹⁰ of care leavers aged 16 to 18, some 61% had been placed in care under a Care Order and 35% were Accommodated (Article 21). The remaining 4% of care leavers had other legal statuses including Interim Care Orders while in care.

2.2.2. Length of Most Recent Period in Care

Every child's care history is unique and some children may experience more than one episode of care. For this publication, only information on the duration of the last period of care is collected.

Almost two-thirds (65%) of care leavers had been looked after for less than five years in their last period of care, and some 16% had been looked after for more than ten years. On average, females last period of care was shorter (4 years 3 months) than males (5 years 1 month).

Figure 3 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Length of most recent period of care (2020/21)



2.2.3. Last Placement

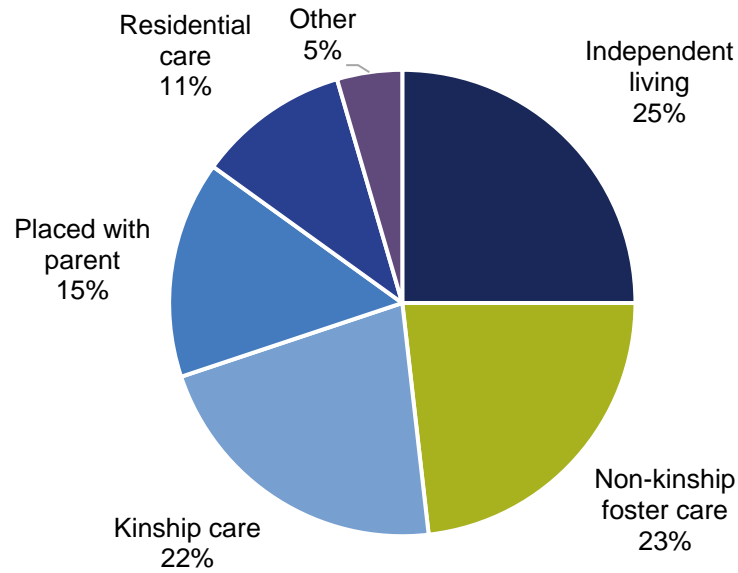
As in previous years, the majority of care leavers in 2020/21 had been in foster care prior to leaving care (45%); 22% in kinship foster care (placed with relatives or a person known to the child) and 23% in non-kinship foster care¹¹. Some 25% had been in independent living arrangements, and a further 15% had been placed with a parent or person with parental responsibilities. Some 11% had been in residential care and 5% had been in 'other'

¹⁰ Definitions of the different legal statuses are set out in Appendix B.

¹¹ Please see appendix B for placement definitions.

placement types which included placements such as supported living, hospital, bed & breakfast, and friends.

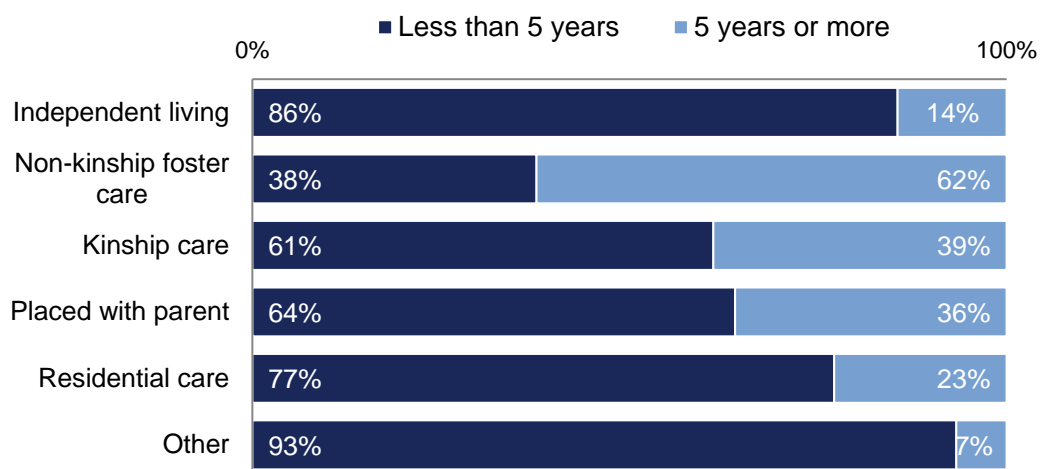
Figure 4 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Last placement type (2020/21)



Young people, whose last placement was foster care (kinship or non-kinship) and those whose last placement was placed with a parent were more likely to have been in care for 5 years or more, compared with all other placement types. Please note that the young person may have had one or several placement changes during the time in care and these figures only reflects the last of their placements before leaving care.

Figure 5 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Last placement by time in care (2020/21)

Please note that the young person may have had one or several placement changes during the time in care and these figures only reflect the last of their placements before leaving care.



2.2.4. Reasons for Leaving Care

Of the 332 care leavers aged 16 to 18 years in 2020/21, the majority (89%) left care because they had reached 18 years of age, with a further 8% leaving to return home to live with their birth parents.

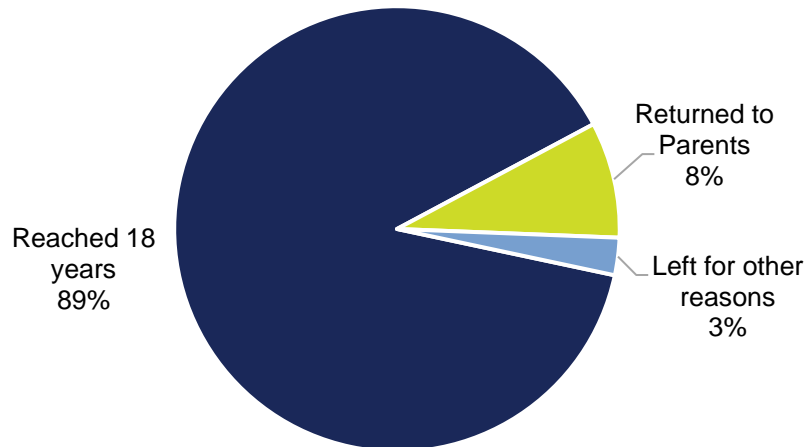
Almost all of those who left care to return to their birth parents (93%) were 16 or 17 years of age. Furthermore, this age group's last period of care was typically shorter, with an average duration of 1 year 4 months. Those who left care due to reaching the age of 18 years had on average a last period of care lasting 4 years 8 months. This may indicate that those who leave care prior to turning 18 may be a cohort of children with different care needs to those who stay in care until they reach adulthood.

Figure 6 Care leavers aged 16-18 – Reason care ceased (2020/21)

Note1: “Left for other reasons” includes “Moved into supported accommodation”, “Transferred to adult social services” and “Other”.

Note2: “Reached 18 years of age” includes a small number of care leavers aged 17 whose 18th birthday was within one week of leaving care.

Note3: Information missing for one care leavers.



2.3. HOW ARE THEY DOING NOW?

2.3.1. Current Accommodation

After leaving care, some 30% of the care leavers aged 16 to 18 were still living with their former foster carers (kinship and non-kinship) as part of a GEM placement arrangement¹². Almost a quarter (23%) were living in some form of supported accommodation, 16% were living with their parents, and 13% were living independently. The remaining 18% of care leavers were divided between living with friends or family, were in custody, or other accommodation.

2.3.2. Educational Attainment

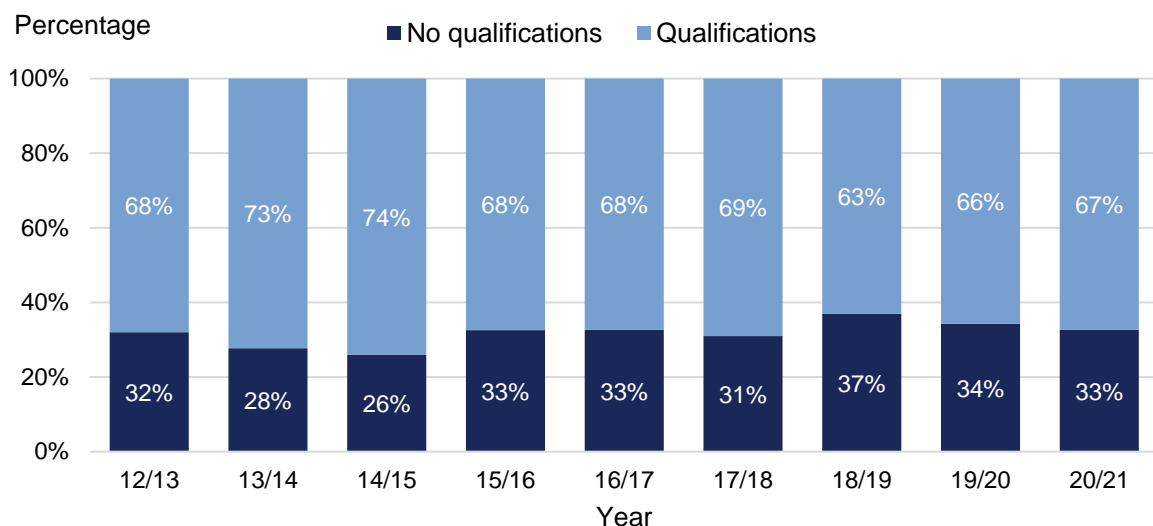
Educational attainment can be an important predictor of success in later life; low educational achievements may impact on future lives and chances for employment.

At the time of leaving care, two-thirds (67%, 214 young people) of the care leavers aged 16 to 18 had educational qualifications; whilst 33% of the care leavers did not have any qualifications at the time of leaving care (104 young people)¹³.

As the characteristics of the cohort of care leavers can vary each year, the educational outcomes may also vary. Some annual variation can be seen in care leavers' qualifications, however the general trend has remained the same over the last years.

Figure 7 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Care leavers' educational qualifications at time of leaving care (2012/13 - 2020/21)

Note: Excludes a small number of care leavers who either had severe learning disability or no recorded information.



¹² The *Going the Extra Mile* scheme was launched in 2006 and aims to promote continuity and stability in post care life for young people living with foster carers and who are in education.

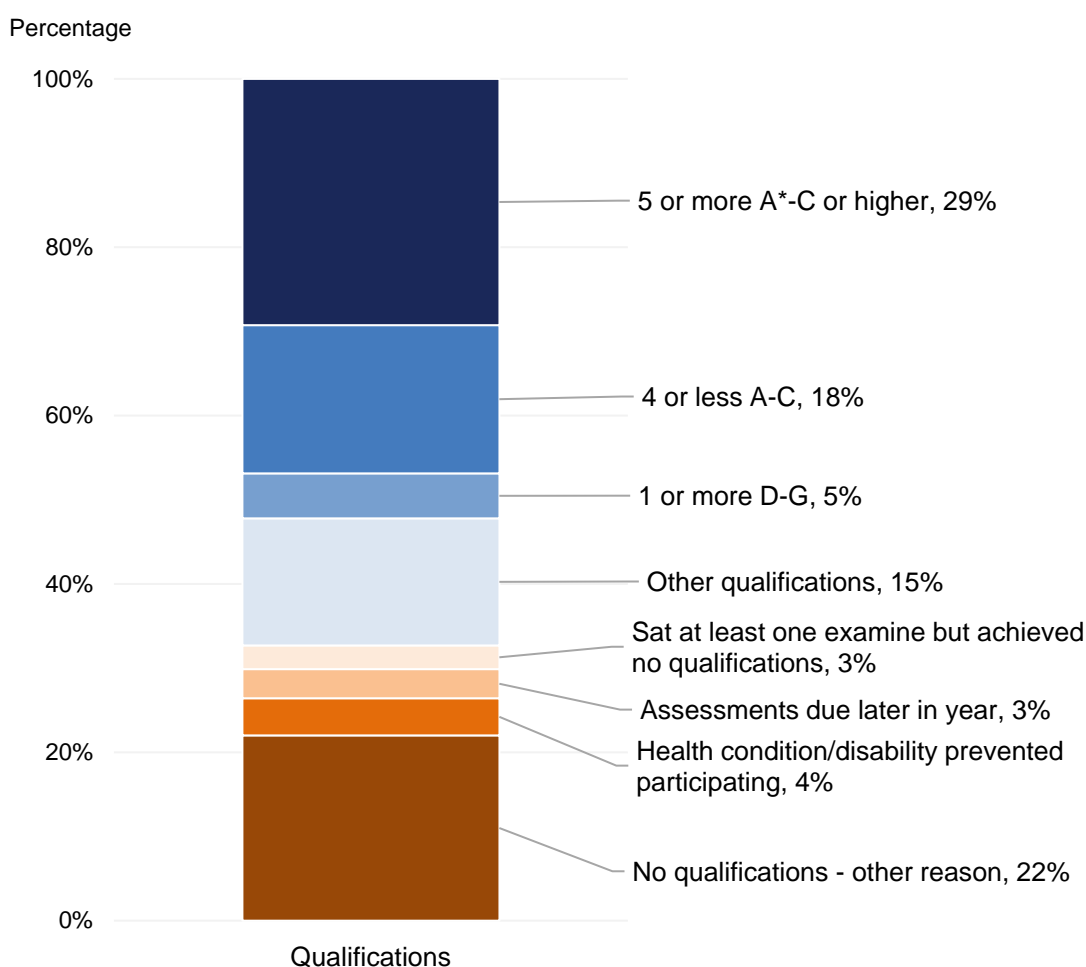
¹³ Figures exclude 14 care leavers who either had severe learning difficulties or no recorded information.

The 33% with no qualifications in 2020/21 represented 104 care leavers aged 16 to 18. Some 70 of these did not sit any examinations, even though they had reached an appropriate age to do so. Nine young people sat examinations but did not obtain any qualifications, and eleven were due to take examinations after leaving care. A further fourteen had health conditions or disabilities preventing them from sitting exams (see figure below).

Figure 8 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Care leavers’ educational qualifications at time of leaving care (2020/21)

Note: Excludes a small number of care leavers who had either severe learning disability or no reported information.

Note: Some young people had both GCSE and NVQ or essential skills qualifications. These have been grouped in the appropriate GCSE category.



A higher proportion of females left care with qualifications compared with males (74% compared to 62%). Some 37% of females obtained five GCSE’s grades A*-C or higher compared with 23% of males. Some 38% of males and 26% of females left care with no qualifications¹⁴.

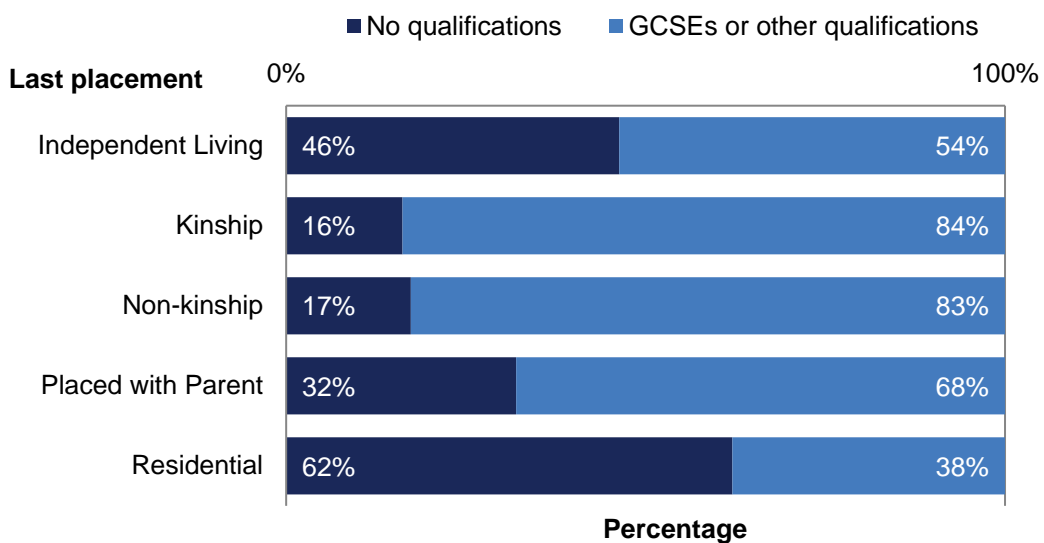
¹⁴ Details are set out in the accompanying [Tables](#).

The following analyses compare those care leavers aged 16 to 18 with GCSE's or other qualifications (214, 67%) and those with no qualifications (104, 33%)¹⁵.

Some 83% of care leavers previously in foster care placements had GCSEs or other qualifications at the time of leaving care (83% non-kinship and 84% kinship). Just over two-thirds of those placed with parents had qualifications (68%) and 54% of those living independently. Some 38% of those in residential care had GCSEs or other qualifications when leaving care.

Figure 9 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Qualifications achieved by last placement type (2020/21)

Note: Excludes a small number of care leavers who either had severe learning disability or missing values.

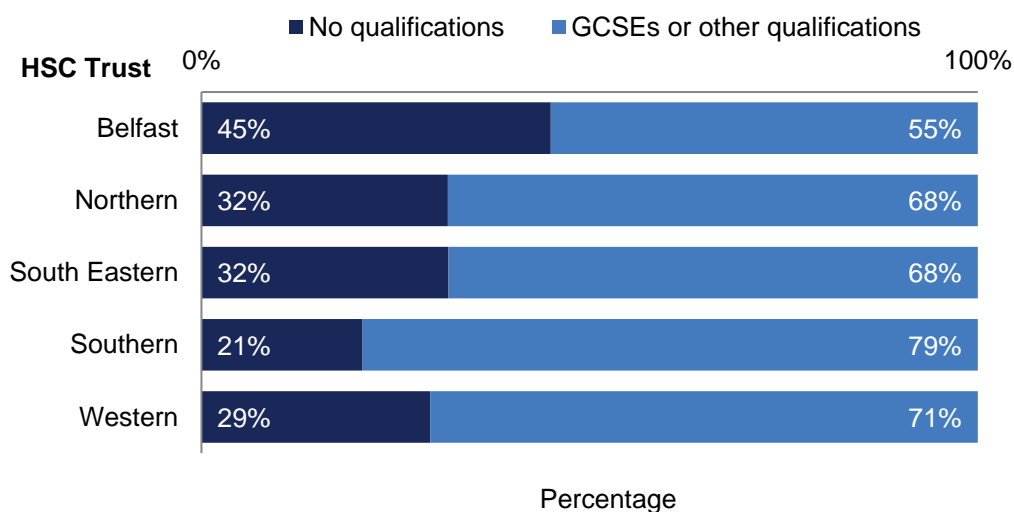


Length of time of the last period of care also appeared to be important in terms of educational attainment. Children in care for five years or more tended to do better academically than those in care for less than five years. Some 81% of care leavers in care for five years or more had obtained GCSE's or other qualifications, compared with 60% of those in care for less than five years. Please note, this difference may be related to different placement types experienced by the age groups of care leavers.

¹⁵ Excludes a small number of care leavers who either had severe learning disability or missing values.

Figure 10 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Qualification achieved by HSC Trust (2020/21)

Note: Excludes a small number of care leavers who either had severe learning disability or missing values.



At the time of leaving care, a higher proportion of the 16 to 18 year old care leavers from the Southern HSC Trust had educational qualifications (79%) compared with the other Trusts. Please note that due to the small numbers involved, these figures may be subject to high year on year volatility.

2.3.3. Educational Attainment – Comparison with the general school population

The Department of Education publish annual statistics on qualifications for the general school leaver population in Northern Ireland. These figures are not directly comparable to the care leaver qualifications, as the care leavers information includes all care leavers (whether in education or not) and is captured at the time of leaving care, not when leaving school.

To best match the school leaver population, a sub-cohort of care leavers was created, covering those who **had GCSE qualifications or who sat exams but did not achieve any qualifications (total of 175 young people)**. The qualifications of the sub-cohort has been compared to the school leaver population in the table below.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, some 97% of school leavers achieved at least 5 GCSEs A*-G compared to 68% of care leavers who sat exams. Furthermore, 53% of care leavers achieved 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C compared to almost 91% of the school leaver population¹⁶.

Please note that this way of comparing the two cohorts (care leavers and NI school leavers) was introduced in 2017/18 and is different from previous publications. The methodology behind capturing the information has not changed, only the way it is presented. Please note,

¹⁶ [Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers](#), Department of Education NI.

the above will still not allow like-for-like comparison, however; it is the best possible match based on the data available.

Table 2. Attainment of Care Leavers aged 16 to 18 who had sat exams (2019/20 and 2020/21) and School Leaver (2019/20)

*Excludes care leavers aged 16 to 18 with non-GCSE qualifications (eg NVQs or essential skills); those who did not sit exams due to health conditions, disability or learning disability; those who were due to sit exams after leaving care and those who did not engage in school/education.

**Year 12, 13 or 14 pupils leaving mainstream, grant aided post-primary schools.

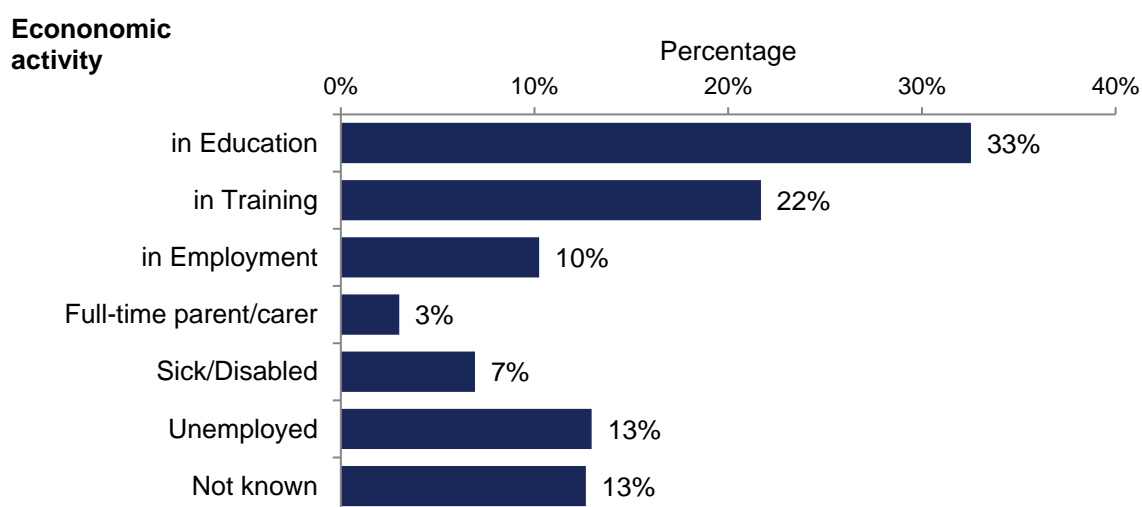
Source: [Department of Education NI](#).

Qualifications	Care leavers aged 16 to 18 who sat exams* 2019/20	Care leavers aged 16 to 18 who sat exams* 2020/21	School leavers 2019/20**
At least 5 GCSEs A*-G	68.2%	68.0%	97.3%
At least 5 GCSE A*-C	48.4%	53.1%	91.3%
No formal qualifications	5.7%	5.1%	0.6%

2.3.4. Economic Activity

Figure 11 below details economic activity for care leavers aged 16 to 18 years for 2020/21. Most of the young people were in education or training at the time of leaving care (33% and 22% respectively), while 10% were in employment. Some 7% were economically inactive due to sickness or disability, and a further 3% were economically inactive due to caring/parental responsibilities. Most of the 13% who were unemployed when leaving care, were either lacking motivation to engage in education, training or employment, or actively seeking employment.

Figure 11 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Economic activity (2020/21)

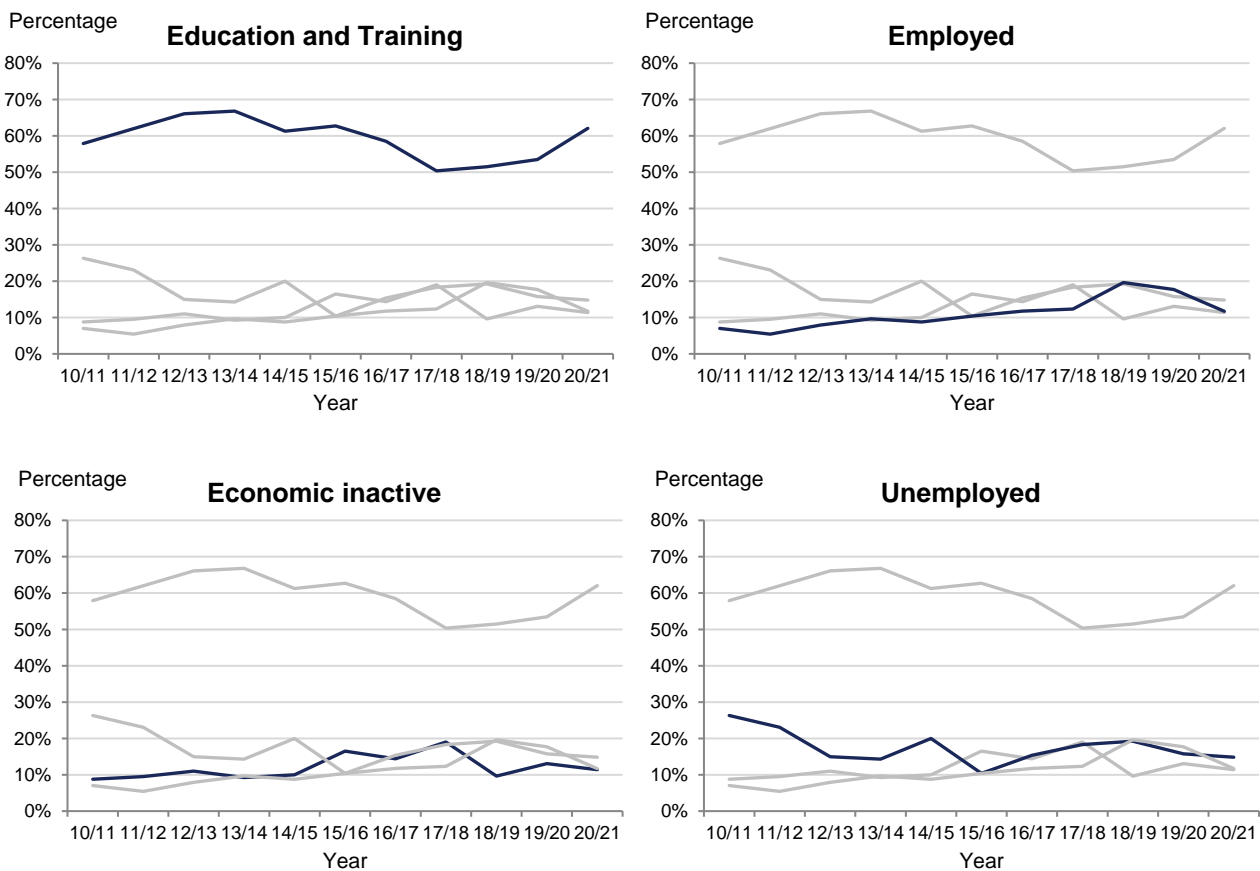


The findings of this section relate only to those for whom economic activity was reported¹⁷

Of the 290 care leavers aged 16 to 18 in 2020/21, whose economic activity was reported, 74% were in full time or part time education, training, or employment. Some 15% were unemployed, and 11% were economically inactive because of caring responsibilities or illness/disabilities. The proportion of care leavers in education or training is substantially larger than the other categories, which has been the trend the last ten years (see figure below).

Figure 12 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Economic activity on leaving care (2020/21)

Note: Excludes care leavers where economic activity was not known.



Looking at the HSC Trusts individually, in 2020/21, the proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment at the time of leaving care ranged between 66% (Northern Trust) and 83% (Southern Trust).

A slightly higher proportion of male care leavers were in education training or employment than female care leavers (76% and 71% respectively). Although based on small numbers, a

¹⁷ Economic activity was not known/not reported for 42 of the care leavers aged 16 to 18 in 2020/21 (13%)

higher proportion of females were economically inactive due to caring responsibilities or disability /ill health (17% compared to 5%).

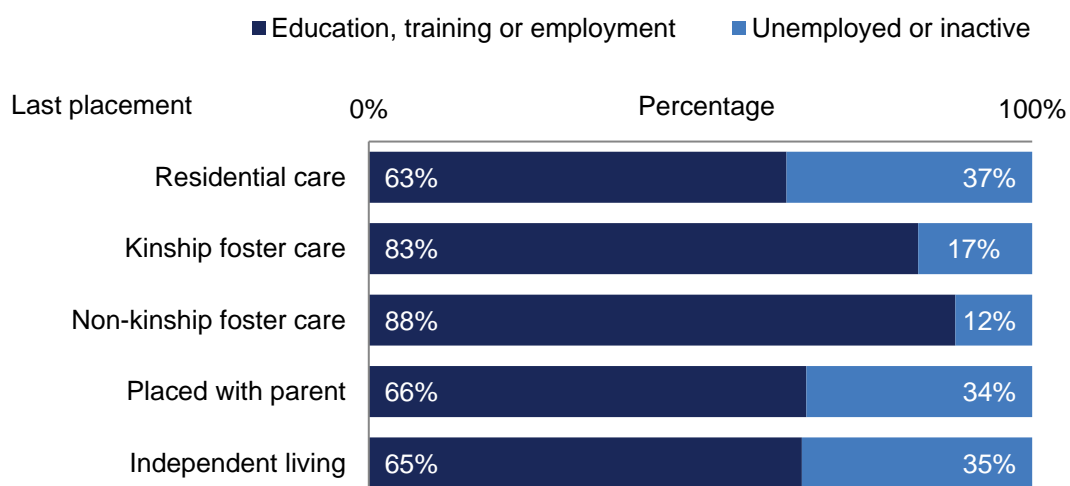
As can be expected, having qualifications correlated highly with economic activity, with 81% of those with GCSEs or other qualifications in education, training or employment compared with 54% of those without qualifications.

Some 80% of care leavers whose last period of care lasted five years or longer were in education, training, or employment. The corresponding figure for those in care for less than five years was 70%.

Care leavers whose last placement was foster care (both kinship and non-kinship) fared better in terms of economic activity on leaving care, with 86% in education, training or employment. For all other placement types, the proportion was between 63% and 66% (see figure below). Please note that these analysis include at times very small numbers and figures must therefore be interpreted with care.

Figure 13 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Economic activity by latest placement type (2020/21)

Note: Excludes care leavers where economic activity was not known.



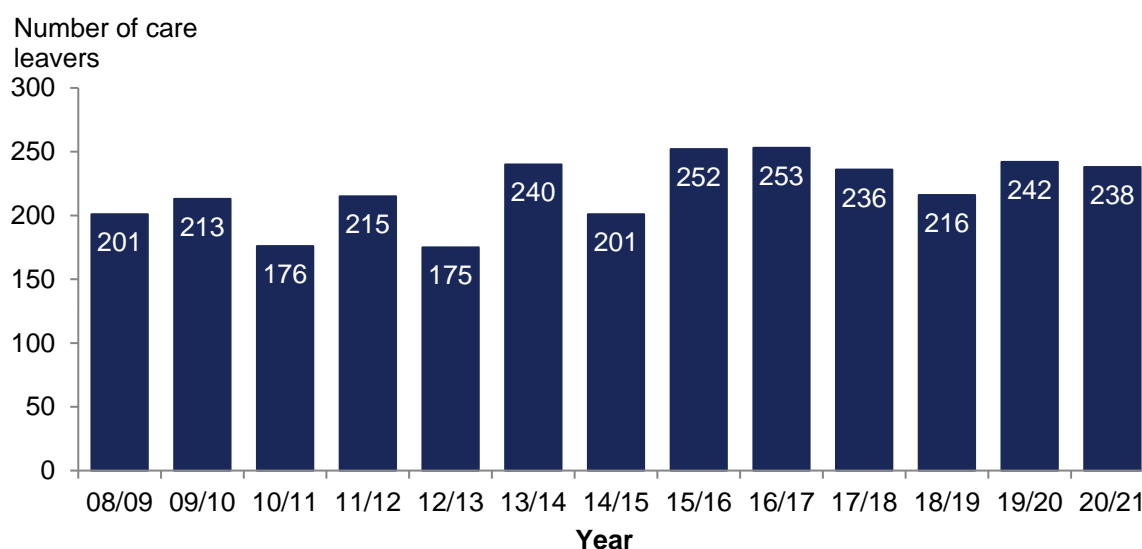
3. Care Leavers Aged 19

3.1. WHO ARE THE CARE LEAVERS AGED 19?

During the year ending 31 March 2021, there were 238 young people in Northern Ireland, who had been in care on 1 April 2018, and who reached their 19th birthday during the year ending 31 March 2021. This was similar to the previous year (242).

Of the 238 care leavers aged 19 in 2020/21, 127 (53%) were male and 111 (47%) were female. This gender split was similar to the general population of that age group in Northern Ireland, where 53% were males and 47% females¹⁸.

Figure 14 Number of care leavers aged 19 in Northern Ireland (2008/09 – 2020/21)



¹⁸ [2020 Mid-Year Population Estimate](#) (NISRA 2021).

Table 3. Care leavers aged 19 by Health and Social Care Trust (2020/21)

HSC Trust	Number of care leavers	Numbers change from last year	Proportion of care leavers
Belfast HSC Trust	60	+1	25%
Northern HSC Trust	47	-8	20%
South Eastern HSC Trust	29	-1	12%
Southern HSC Trust	47	+7	20%
Western HSC Trust	55	-3	23%
Northern Ireland	238	-4	100%

The number of care leavers in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust can fluctuate year on year. In 2020/21, the highest proportion of care leavers aged 19 were in the Belfast HSC Trust (25%) and the smallest proportion in the South Eastern HSC Trust (12%).

The care leaver's individual geographical location was linked with the [Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017](#)¹⁹ to identify the deprivation quintile rank of home location before last entry into care and at age 19²⁰. For the young people where geographical information was available²¹, a higher proportion were living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland at age 19 (41%) than their home location just before their last entry into care (35%). Further analysis showed that some two-fifths (43%) of the care leavers were living in an area of same deprivation rank when leaving care as before last entry into care, 31% were living in an area rated as more deprived and 25% were living in an area rated less deprived.

3.1.1. Religion and Ethnicity

Information on care leaver religion and ethnicity is collected for equality monitoring purposes. In terms of religion, the proportion of care leavers aged 19 from a Catholic community background (50%) was higher than those from a Protestant community background (40%). Some 10% were of 'Unknown', 'None' or 'Other' religious backgrounds, which was marginally higher than the previous year.

The vast majority of the care leavers aged 19 had a white ethnic background (95%).

3.1.2. Disability

Of those care leavers aged 19, 35 had a disability (15%), and of that, just over half (51%) had a learning disability²². Although not directly comparable, figures from the 2011 Census

¹⁹ Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017.

²⁰ These analyses were only carried out for care leavers with Northern Ireland geographical location.

²¹ Northern Ireland geographical information prior to entering care was available for 89% of the care leavers and information was available for 86% upon leaving care. Information was supplied for 80% of the care leavers for both prior to entering care and after leaving care.

²² Please note that the care leavers may have had multiple disabilities with other disabilities alongside learning disability.

indicated that 7% of 18-19 year olds in Northern Ireland had a disability²³. This suggests that a disproportionately high number of care leavers have a disability.

²³ [Census 2011](#) – 18 to 19 year olds with long term health problem limiting day to day activities.

3.2. WHAT WAS THEIR LAST PERIOD IN CARE?

3.2.1. Age when leaving care

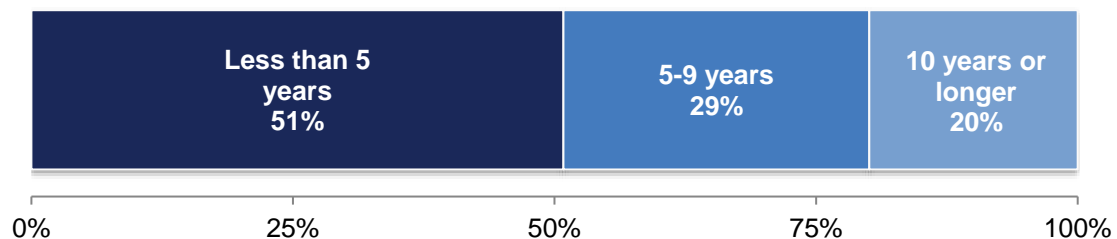
The majority of care leavers aged 19 left care on reaching 18 years of age (71%) with 29% leaving at 16 or 17 years of age.

3.2.2. Last period in care

Every child's care history is unique and some children may be in care for only a short period whereas others may be in long-term care for most of their lives. For the care leavers aged 19 in 2020/21, the average length of time in care was 5 years 10 months prior to leaving care²⁴ which is similar to the previous year. In 2020/21, the average last period in care was shorter for females than males (5 years 8 months and 6 years respectively). For just over half (52%) of care leavers the duration of the last period in care was less than five years, whereas for 20% of care leavers it lasted for ten years or longer.

Figure 15 Care leavers aged 19 – Length of last period of care (2020/21)

Note: Excludes two care leavers where information was not reported.



²⁴ Excludes two care leavers where information was not reported.

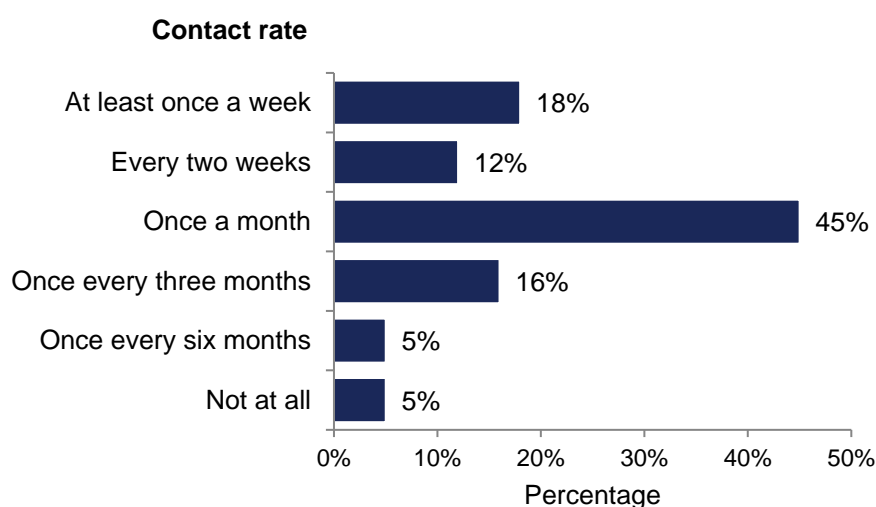
3.3. HOW ARE THEY DOING NOW?

3.3.1. Contact with Social Services

The 'Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002' requires HSC Trusts to take reasonable steps to maintain contact with care leavers. For 2020/21, HSC Trusts reported contacts with 226 (95%) of the care leavers aged 19²⁵. This is an increase of more than 20 percentage points since 2003/04²⁶ when the contact rate was 72%. In 2020/21 Social Services were in contact with 74% of the care leavers at least once a month.

Figure 16 Care Leavers aged 19 – Contact Rates by Frequency of Contact (2020/21)

Note: 'Not at all' includes a small number of young people not residents in UK or who are deceased.



Northern Ireland contact rates have in recent years been higher than that of local authorities' contact rates with care leavers aged 19 in England, however for 2020/21, the rates were very similar in the two regions.

²⁵ Those not in contact with HSC Trusts include a small number of young people who were not residents in UK or deceased..

²⁶ [Former Care Leavers in Northern Ireland 2003/04](#), DHSSPS 2006.

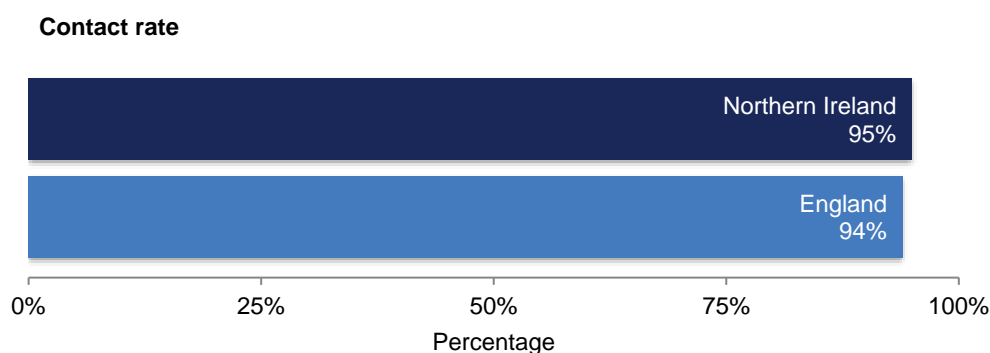
Figure 17 Care leaver aged 19 - Contact rate by region (2020/21)

Source: Northern Ireland: OC3 returns 2020/21

Source: England: Children looked after in England including adoptions, reporting year 2021

Note: Figures for young people in which there is no information have been counted as 'not in touch' for England. This includes those young people with whom the local authority is not in touch, young people who have refused contact with the local authority and young people who no longer require services.

Note: For Northern Ireland, those not in contact with HSC Trusts included a small number of young people not residents in UK or deceased.



3.3.2. Support from Social Services

Some 157 (67%) of the care leavers aged 19 were receiving some form of ongoing support from social services^{27,28}. Of those young people receiving support, 99 (63%) were receiving some kind of financial support, for accommodation, education, or other expenses, or a combination of these²⁹. Some 61 young people (39%) were receiving support for a 'Going the Extra Mile' (GEM) placement³⁰, and 20 (13%) were receiving support for mental health issues.

Table 4. Care leavers aged 19 – Support from Social Services

Note: Care leavers may receive more than one service.

Type of support	Number of care leavers
Financial support for accommodation	42
Financial support for higher education	26
Financial support other (eg towards travel, groceries, leisure etc.)	64
GEM placement	61
Mental health services / therapeutic support	20
Other	6

²⁷ Excludes care leavers who died before their 19th birthday.

²⁸ Care leavers may be receiving more than one service.

²⁹ Other financial support can be for travel, groceries, leisure etc.

³⁰ The Going the Extra Mile scheme was launched in 2006 and aims to promote continuity and stability in post care life for young people living with foster carers.

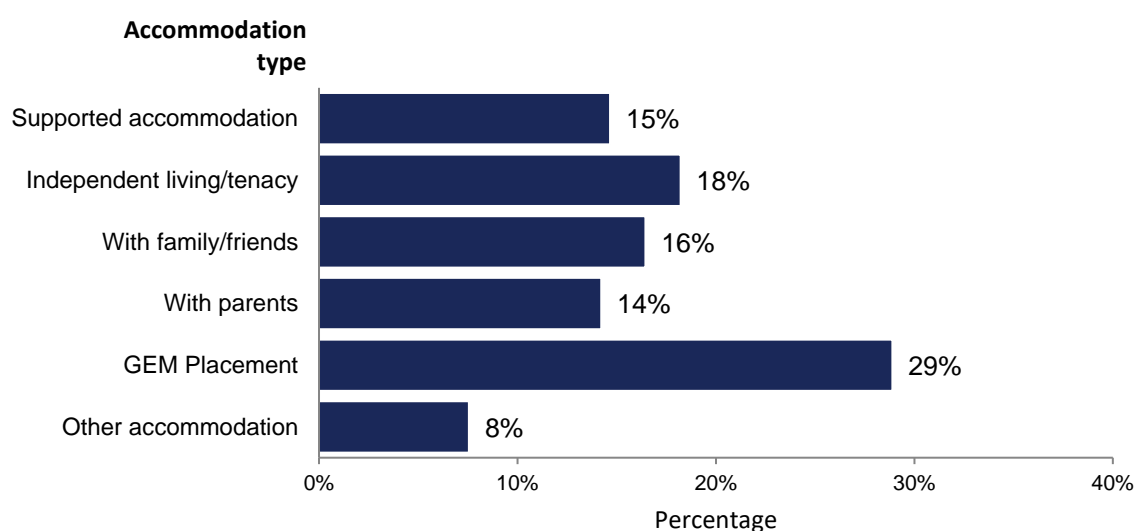
Similar proportions of males and females were receiving support from social services after leaving care (66% and 67% respectively). Care leavers with a disability were more likely to be receiving support (80%) than those without a disability (64%).

3.3.3. Accommodation

Care leavers were living in a variety of types of accommodation on their 19th birthday. Almost a third (29%) were living with their former foster carers in a GEM arrangement. Some 31% were living with their parents or family and friends. Some 18% of care leavers were living in independent accommodation, while 15% were living in supported accommodation³¹.

Figure 18 Care leavers aged 19 – Type of accommodation

Note: Excludes care leavers who were not in contact with their HSC Trust.



3.3.4. Dependants

Some 10% of care leavers aged 19 were parents, 11 young women and 11 young men³². Please note that the proportion with dependent children within this cohort can fluctuate extensively year on year.

In 2020/21, 10% of female care leavers aged 19 became mothers on or before their 19th birthday. During 2020, around 1% of 15 to 19 year old females in the general population in Northern Ireland became mothers³³. Although these figures are not directly comparable, it does indicate a higher prevalence of teenage mothers in the cohorts of care leavers.

³¹ Figures relate to those care leavers in contact with their HSC Trust.

³² Note: This relates only to those young people with whom the HSC Trusts were in contact.

³³ Source: [Registrar General Annual Report 2020 Births](#), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2020; [2020 Mid-Year Population Estimate](#) (NISRA 2020). Please note, the figure has been calculated using the number of live births and therefore, may be an overestimation as it does not take account of multiple births.

3.3.5. Economic Activity

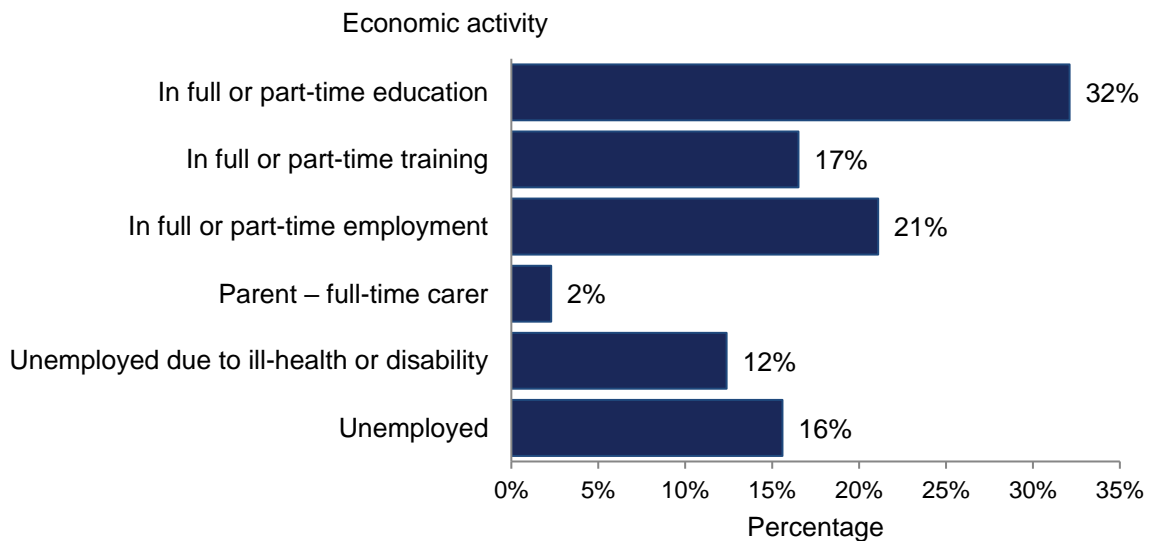
All information below referring to the economic activity of care leavers aged 19, relates to 218 care leavers who had been in contact with social services during the 12 months prior to their 19th birthday, and whose economic activity was known³⁴.

Of the care leavers aged 19 in 2020/21, whose economic activity was known, 70 (32%) were in full or part-time education, 36 (17%) were in full or part-time training³⁵ and 46 (21%) were in full or part-time employment³⁶. Of those care leavers in education, 19 were in higher education³⁷.

Just under a third (30%) of the care leavers were economically inactive; 34 from being unemployed (16%); 27 had ill health or a disability preventing them from being economic active (12%); and 5 were full time carers (2%).

Figure 19 Care leavers aged 19 – Proportion of care leavers by economic activity 2020/21

Excludes 20 young people not in contact with the HSC Trust, who had died before their 19th birthday or whose activity information was not completed.



³⁴ Excludes 20 young people not in contact with the HSC Trust; who had died before their 19th birthday or whose activity information was not completed/not known.

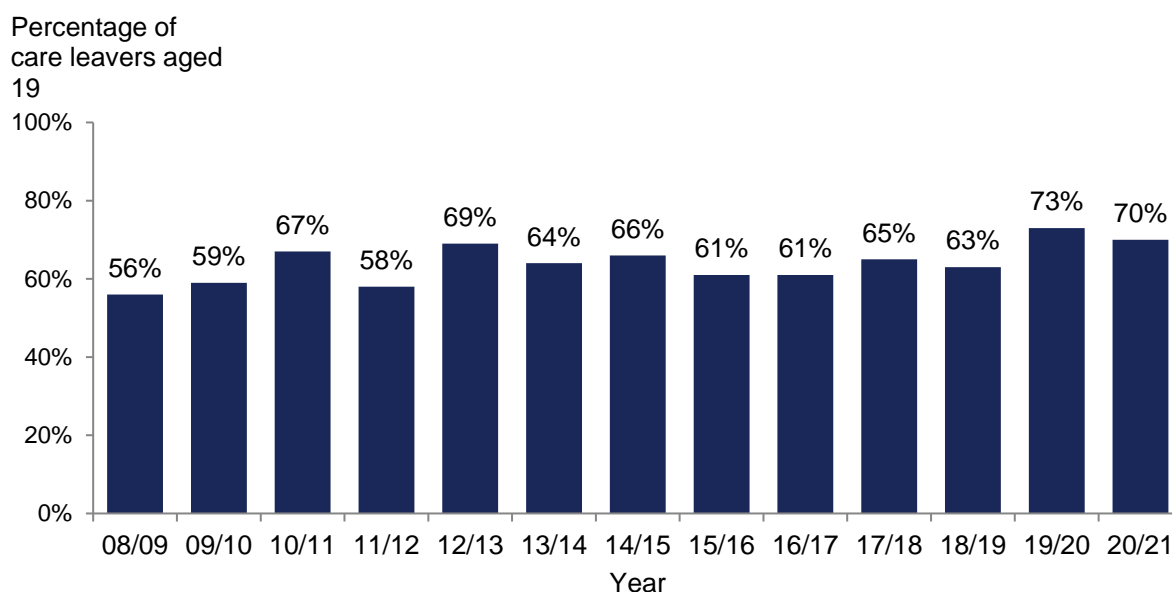
³⁵ "Training" includes a small number of non-Governmental training programmes.

³⁶ Some 7% were in full time employment with planned training.

³⁷ Higher education is defined as studies beyond A Level, leading to a degree or higher qualification, including diplomas in higher education, teaching and nursing qualifications, HNDs, ONDs and BTEC. This includes full-time and part-time study if it is considered the main activity.

Figure 20 Care leavers aged 19 – Proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment (2008/09 – 2020/21)

Excludes young people not in contact with the HSC Trust, who had died before their 19th birthday or whose activity information was not completed.



In 2020/21, 70% of all care leavers aged 19 were in education, training or employment. This was slightly lower than in 2019/20, when 73% were economically active, however higher than in previous years.

A higher proportion of female (74%) than male (66%) care leavers aged 19 were in education, training, or employment in 2020/21.

A care leaver is categorised as economically inactive if they are not in employment, training, or education due to caring responsibilities or disability. Therefore, it can be expected that a lower proportion of care leavers in those cohorts are economically active. In 2020/21, 56% of those with a disability (e.g. learning or physical disability) were in education, training or employment. Of the 22 care leavers with dependent children, 9 (41%) were in education, training or employment. Please note that due to small numbers of care leavers with dependants and with disabilities, these figures may be subject to high year on year volatility.

With the exception of Belfast HSC Trust, the proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment ranged between 70% and 78%. The proportion in Belfast HSC Trust was substantially lower, at 56%. It is however worth mentioning that this Trust had a much higher proportion of young people unemployed due to ill health, disability or being a carer (23%). This proportion in all other Trusts ranged between 10% and 15%. Please note, the number of care leavers in each Trust is small, therefore, large year on year variability may occur (see Tables for details).

In previous years, there has been a marked difference in young people in education, training or employment dependent on the time they had spent in care. In 2020/21, this difference was less marked, with some 68% of those in care for less than 5 years in education, training or employment compared with 74% of young people who had been in care for 5 years or longer

3.3.6. *NEET*

The term NEET refers to young people not in education, employment or training. The term was first used in the 1990s and is now in common use. Calculating NEET is dependent on the information sources available. As such, there may be some difference, for example, between NEET figures for Northern Ireland in general and that of care leavers in this survey.

In this data collection, care leavers who are NEET refers to those who were not in part- or full-time education, training³⁸ or employment. Those care leavers whose activity was not known were excluded from the calculations. In general, care leavers defined as NEET were either economically inactive, due to illness/disability or full time caring responsibilities, or they were unemployed. In 2020/21, 30% of care leavers aged 19 were NEET.

³⁸ Includes a small number of non-Government supported training programmes.

Appendix A Technical Notes

Care Leaver Statistics for Northern Ireland

Statistics on care leavers have previously been published in two separate publications; “Care leavers Aged 16-18 in Northern Ireland” and “Care Leavers Aged 19 in Northern Ireland”. Due to the similarities of topic and to allow for better use of resources producing the publications, these two publications were merged to the bulletin “Northern Ireland Care Leavers” in 2013/14. Historic publications on care leavers in Northern Ireland can be downloaded from the [Department of Health’s \(DoH\) website](#).

OC1 and OC3 Returns

The information presented in this bulletin derives from the thirteenth OC1 information collection of care leavers aged 16 to 18 in Northern Ireland and the twelfth OC3 information collection of care leavers at the age of 19. These information returns were provided by each of the five Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts in Northern Ireland to Community Information Branch (CIB) in the DoH.

OC1 and OC3, together with its companion return OC2 (children in care for 12 months or longer at 30 September), provide a comprehensive series of data on looked after children in Northern Ireland. It is a stated aim of DoH to improve outcomes for children in care, by improving the quality and stability of placements and improving educational opportunities for young people as they make the transition to adulthood. These publications help to measure the Department’s progress in meeting these stated aims.

The OC1 return, introduced in 2002, reports the circumstances of young people at 31 March aged 16 to 18 who had left care during the previous financial year. It collects a range of information, including educational achievement, economic activity, disability, duration in care and placement prior to leaving care.

The OC3 return, introduced in 2004, reports the circumstances of care leavers at the time of their 19th birthday. It collects information on frequency of contacts with social services, economic activity and accommodation.

To help put some figures within their wider social context, comparative information with, for example, the general school population and looked after children in other countries in the United Kingdom have been included where possible. Users of these statistics find such comparisons interesting; though it should be stressed that they are not like-for-like comparisons and may merely reflect differences between different cohorts of children.

Data Collection

The returns used to collect this information has one record for each young person fitting the parameters of the collection. The returns are completed online by nominated HSC Trust staff using a secure web-based application. All records are pseudoanonymised to protect the confidentiality of these young people.

For inclusion in OC1, care leavers had to be aged 16 to 18 years when leaving care and left care during the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2020. The information collected related to the last period in care.

The OC3 return relates to care leavers at the time of their 19th birthday. It provides data on all care leavers at age 19, who had been looked after on 1 April, 3 years previously.

All references made to 'Year' refer to the financial year, 1 April to 31 March, i.e. for the 2019/20 collection the reference period was 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

Guidance notes and other documents associated with the completion of the OC surveys are available to view or download from the [DoH website](#).

Rounding/Disclosure Conventions

Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers and as a consequence some percentages may not sum to 100. It has been necessary to suppress other figures whenever it would be possible to calculate the value of a suppressed number by means of simple arithmetic. The rule applied in these circumstances has been to suppress the next smallest data item.

Data Quality

All information submitted by HSC Trusts was validated at the point of entry. Community Information Branch, within DoH, perform further checks, using historical data to monitor annual variations and emerging trends.

A National Statistics Publication

The United Kingdom Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- are trustworthy;
- have high quality; and
- are of value to the public.

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed. [Report 265](#) is the most recent assessment of these statistics.

User feedback

If you have any comments on this publication, please contact:

Community Information Branch

Department of Health

Annexe 2, Castle Buildings

Stormont, BT4 3SQ

Email: cib@health-ni.gov.uk

Tel: 028 90522580

Related Publications

Details of statistics on looked after children published by other countries in the UK (United Kingdom) can be found as detailed below.

Scotland

[Children's Social Work Statistics](#)

Wales

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services>

England

[Children looked after in England including adoption](#)

Other statistics produced by the DoH relating to looked after children and other areas of children's social care with relevant web links are detailed below:

Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/childrens-social-care-statistics-northern-ireland>

Children in Care in Northern Ireland

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/looked-after-children>

Child Protection Register

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/child-protection-register>

Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/children-adopted-care>

Appendix B Definitions

Placement

Foster care is when a child is placed by a Trust, or by its parents (or those with parental responsibility), with other persons who will care for, and rear the child. Foster Carers are approved by a Health and Social Care Trust and receive an allowance for their caring responsibilities from the approving Trust.

Kinship foster care (approved) is when a looked after child is placed by a Trust with a relative, friend, or other person with a prior connection to the child, who will care for and rear the child. A person with a prior connection could be someone who knows the child in a professional capacity such as a childminder, a teacher, or a youth worker, although these are not exclusive categories. Kinship Foster Carers are approved by a Health and Social Care Trust and receive an allowance for their caring responsibilities from the approving Trust.

Placed for adoption refers to a child that has been approved to be adopted and is placed with their prospective adoptive parents pending affirmation from the courts. It can be distinguished between children who are placed for adoption with their former foster carers and those who are placed for adoption with 'others' (not former foster carers).

Residential care is when a looked after child is placed by a Trust in a Children's Home. Residential care for children/Children's Homes are there to ensure that the needs of children are met when they cannot live with their own family. They are a place for children to develop and grow, as well as providing food, shelter, and space for play and leisure in a caring environment. Children's Homes look after children with many different needs.

Secure accommodation is provided for children on a short term basis when it is likely that the child, in any other setting, will injure him/herself or abscond and is likely to suffer significant harm when absconding.

Placed with parent (in previous publications called "Placed with Family") refers to children for whom a Care Order exists and who are placed with their parents, a person who is not a parent but who has parental responsibility for the child or where a child is in care and there was a residence order in force with respect to him/her immediately before the care order was made, and who are placed with a person in whose favour the residence order was made.

Emergency foster care is when a looked after child is placed by a social worker in an emergency (short term) arrangement, for example emergency kinship foster care. Emergency kinship foster carers would normally not have been previously approved by a Health and Social Care Trust as foster carers.

Independent living arrangements refers to children placed in independent accommodation. This would refer to young people between 16 to 18 years old. Independent living arrangements can further be categorised into with or without formal support from Trust.

Other placements refers to any placement reported that are not covered by other categories given. This may include children in assessment centres, boarding schools etc, and also special arrangements relating to a Trust. The categories included may change from year to year.

Legal Status

The legal framework for compulsory intervention in the care and upbringing of children. If more than one legal status is indicated or in force for the child at 31 March, the latest one only is recorded.

Emergency Protection Order (Article 63 & 64): An Emergency Protection Order (EPO) is intended for use in urgent cases to protect a child in the short-term. Almost anyone with a concern can apply for an EPO, although in most circumstances a Trust will seek one. Where the applicant is a Trust or the

NSPCC they must show that in the course of fulfilling their duty to investigate they are being unreasonably frustrated in gaining access to the child. Anyone else applying for an EPO they must show that the child is likely to suffer significant harm unless removed to, or allowed to remain, in a safe place.

An EPO lasts for eight days but can be extended on one occasion for a further seven days. An application to discharge the order cannot be made within the first 72 hours giving a Trust sometime to decide what actions to take in respect of the child. The person to whom the order is addressed also gains parental responsibility for the child for the duration of the order.

Accommodated (Article 21): Children with this legal status have been accommodated by a HSC Trust if there is no one who has parental responsibility for them, they have been lost or abandoned or if the person who has been caring for them has been prevented, for whatever reason, from providing them with suitable accommodation or care. Children are often accommodated with the permission of their parents.

Care Order (Article 50 or 59): A Care Order accords the HSC Trust parental responsibility and allows for the child to be removed from the parental home. This does not extinguish the parental responsibility of the child's parents but means that they cannot exercise this responsibility while the Care Order is in place. For a Court to make a Care Order it must be satisfied that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm and that the harm or likelihood of harm is attributable to the care given to the child, or likely to be given to the child, not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give or the child being beyond parental control.

Interim Care Orders (Article 57): An Interim Care Order is put in place following an adjournment of proceedings for a Care Order or in any family proceedings in which a Court orders a Trust to investigate the circumstances of a child. An Interim Care Order can be in place for up to eight weeks initially and for a further four weeks upon renewal and subsequent occasions that Court deems an Interim Order necessary.

Supervision Order: This order requires the Trust to advise, assist and befriend the supervised child and can only be granted if the same threshold conditions that apply for Care Orders are met. This Order does not give the Trust parental responsibility. It does allow a social worker to issue directions about the child's upbringing including place of residence and involvement in certain programmes. Schedule 3 of the Children Order sets out the full range of matters that may be addressed in a Supervision Order.

Interim Supervision Orders (Article 57): An Interim Supervision can be put in place following an adjournment of proceedings for a Supervision Order or in any family proceedings in which a question arises with respect to the welfare of any child, it appears to the court that it may

be appropriate for a supervision order to be made with respect to him, the court may direct the appropriate authority to undertake an investigation of the child's circumstances.

Appendix C List of Tables

The tables are available in excel format on the [DoH website](#)

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Table 3:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Length of Time in Care
Table 4:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Reasons for Leaving Care
Table 5:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Educational Attainment
Table 6:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Current Activity
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Table 18:	Care leavers aged 19: Support from Social Services
Table 19:	Care leavers aged 19: Health & Social Care Trust

This statistical bulletin and other statistical bulletins published by Community Information Branch are available to download from the [Department of Health website](#)