An Exploration of Independent Advocacy Provision for Children and Young People in Care and Young Care-Leavers- Towards a Best Practice Model

Hilary Jenkinson

2025

School of Applied Social Studies, UCC

EPIC Empowering People in Care

empowering people in care

Table of contents

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to the participants who took part in this research, giving their time, opinions and reflections on what is important in advocacy with care-experienced children and young people. To the advocates and management in EPIC, and to the stakeholder groups from other advocacy services and Tusla management, the time and consideration you gave to the research process is very much appreciated and your input has contributed to a comprehensive and thorough exploration of independent advocacy in this sector.

I would like to express my particular gratitude to the young adults who have experienced the advocacy service in EPIC for their generosity, time and willingness to share their experiences and insights regarding their lived experiences of care, aftercare and beyond, and the important role advocacy has played in their lives. This report and the discussion within it are hugely enriched by your input and this has shaped significantly the findings and recommendations that are made in it.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Tara Madden, Education Project Manager at EPIC, who was the anchor person within EPIC, facilitating, coordinating, and championing the research within the organisation. Your clarity, organisational skills, wisdom and ongoing support have been immensely important in this research process, from initiation to completion – thank you!

An Exploration of Independent Advocacy Provision for Children in Care and Young Care Leavers- Towards a Best Practice Model

Introduction

This report provides a comprehensive exploration of the principles and practice of independent advocacy for children and young people with care experience, with a view to signposting what constitutes best practice in this field and proposing a model of advocacy practice which reflects the key themes arising. Resulting from a research project carried out with EPIC (Empowering People in Care), the report draws from the views of those who have experienced advocacy as children and young adults, those who have provided advocacy as professional independent advocates, management personnel responsible for the provision of those services in the context of EPIC and significant stakeholders in the field of advocacy service provision.

Children with care experience in Ireland, setting the context

In Ireland Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is the state body responsible for the protection and welfare of children. It is also responsible for providing care for those children who are unable to live at home and need alternative care. As of August 2024, there were a total of 5,759 children in care in Ireland. Of these, 87.5% (5,040) were in foster care, 8.7% (500) were in residential care and 3.8% (219) were in other care arrangements (Tusla, 2024 (a)). Aftercare services are available to young people leaving care - up to the age of 21 generally and 23 if they are in education. At the end of Q2 in 2024 there were 2,915 young persons/adults in receipt of aftercare services and of these 77% were in education or accredited training (Tusla, 2024 (b)). Overall this means that 8,674 children and young people are within the remit of Tusla services through the provision of alternative care and aftercare services.

It is well established nationally and internationally that young people who have been in the care system have poorer outcomes compared to the general population when it comes to mental health, education, involvement in the justice system and homelessness (Quinn *et al.*, 2017; Gilligan *et al.*, 2022; Government of Ireland, 2023). This points to the importance of providing these children and young people with the supports and interventions needed in order to work towards ameliorating the additional challenges encountered by them.

Why advocacy?

Many of us at some point in our lives need the support of someone we trust to help us speak up for ourselves or even speak up for us when we are not in a position to. In life, advocacy often comes from

the realms of family and friends however some are in the position of not having these natural networks to draw from. By virtue of their life circumstances, children and young people who are or have been in state care find themselves with few natural networks from which to draw support and gain assistance around the natural challenges of life and growing up. Referring to this, one young adult interviewed for this research said, '*for people in care, it's like even bigger. I feel like a lot of people in care/aftercare already don't have family around them'.* Care-experienced young people have the additional challenges of the traumas that have led to them being in care and then being subject to a child protection and care system which is significantly under pressure, under resourced, lacking personnel and has been described as 'a system under strain' and that, 'despite the dedication of many professionals working within it, is failing some of our most vulnerable children and families' (Corbett and Coulter, 2024: 86, 89)**.** As the State authority responsible for receiving children into care it is also the State's responsibility as their corporate parent to ensure that their needs are met. This includes access to advocacy in the context of a system that very often they find themselves lost in without an effective voice or sense of agency in their own lives (Tierney *et al.*, 2018). Morgan articulates this succinctly when he asks:

> 'shouldn't a caring and civilised society consistently ensure that those who are vulnerable and without other means of support are able to live safely and are not harmed on account of their vulnerability. Shouldn't we guarantee that they benefit from a comforting and practical presence, from someone who can advocate effectively on their behalf?' (Morgan, 2017: 2)

Under Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by Ireland in 1992, all children and young people have a right to 'express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously'. This is particularly pertinent to care-experienced children and young people where the State assumes responsibility for decisions regarding their care and consequent life circumstances such as where they live and with whom, schooling, and family and sibling contact. This right to have a voice and influence in decisions that affect children and young people in care is further enshrined in Irish legislation through the Child Care Act 1991 and more recently the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022. The State's commitment to operationalising this is outlined in the Child and Family agency's (Tusla) *Child and Youth Participation Strategy 2019-2023*. This policy states 'Every time a decision is taken that directly affects a child or young person, individually or collectively, their views are taken into consideration' (Tusla, 2019: 5).

Independent advocacy has a key role in facilitating those in care and care leavers to realise their rights to have their views heard and to participate in and influence decisions affecting them.

Independent advocacy for care-experienced children and care-experienced young people in Ireland

Empowering People in Care (EPIC), is a national organisation that works with and for children and young people who are currently living in state care or who have experience of living in care. This includes those in residential care, special care, and foster care, as well as children accommodated by the State under Section 5 of the Child Care Act, 1991 and those sentenced or remanded by the courts in Oberstown Children's Detention Campus. EPIC also works with young people preparing to leave care, in aftercare services, and with young adults with care experience up to the age of 26 years. EPIC is the only independent organisation in Ireland providing a direct 1:1 advocacy service to children and young people in the care of the State or in aftercare services.

EPIC's National Advocacy Service aims to 'enable children in care and young people with care experience to have their views and concerns heard and taken seriously. It works to empower them to speak for themselves, resolve issues and challenges they experience, and to help them obtain the supports and services they require during their childhood and transition to adulthood' (EPIC, 2024: 9).

As EPIC approached its 25th Anniversary, the organisation was eager to review its provision of independent advocacy services to children in care and young care-leavers and examine national and international best practice in the provision of direct advocacy to this cohort. This research is intended to inform a future facing model of practice at a critical point in the organisation's evolution.

Best practice in Advocacy – signposts from the literature

In this section we will explore some of the key themes arising in contemporary research and literature regarding advocacy with care-experienced youth with a particular focus on what is considered optimal practice in this field. The first part will outline and discuss key principles which are central to good advocacy practice. The section will proceed to explore some broader considerations pertinent to independent advocacy.

Independent advocacy specifically for children and young people in care is particularly well developed in the United Kingdom and in Ireland. Services in these countries are at the forefront of providing independent advocacy for young people in care/with care experience where the focus is on facilitating young people to participate and have their voices heard (McDowall, 2016). Much of the available (English language) literature and research pertaining to advocacy within the care context emanates from these regions. Research from other jurisdictions such as the US, tends to have different understandings of advocacy which includes the incorporation of child protection and best interests lenses rather than independent advocacy (see Cascardi *et al.*, 2015). In Canada, government policy has a strong focus on child advocacy, with child and youth advocate offices and officers in each region of the country. However the focus is on implementing children's rights (as informed by UNCRC) in the general child and youth population rather than a particular focus on children and young people with care experience or in the care system (see Bendo, 2020). In Australia the concept of independent advocacy for children and young people in care is considered important, however due to the limits of available funding, and consequently staffing, independent advocacy is carried out collectively at systemic and policy levels rather than on an individual basis (see McDowall, 2016).

Much of the research exploring issues and practice relating to children and young people with care experience draws from the views of practitioners working in the field (Government of Ireland, 2023). A recent review of literature in this field conducted in Ireland concluded that research that directly draws from the views of young people themselves is relatively scarce (Government of Ireland, 2023). Other researchers in this sector highlight the challenges of gaining access to recruiting young people with care experience to participate directly in research (Daly and Gilligan, 2005; Daly 2012). However Bendo points out that the views and perspectives of young people must be central in a process that seeks to develop best practice in advocacy (Bendo 2020). A key focus of this literature review, and this research overall is on the views of care-experienced young people as 'they act as meaning-makers in their own lives and have lived experiences' (Bendo, 2020: 20) which are at the forefront of signposting what constitutes meaningful and effective interventions in advocacy.

Key principles of advocacy practice

In reviewing the literature around advocacy, several key principles emerge as central to effective practice in this sphere. These include being rights informed, the importance of supportive relationships, participation, empowerment and the centrality of the voice of children and young people, independence of advocacy, knowledge and expertise of the advocate, and impact in terms of practical issues being addressed.

Advocacy informed by a rights-based approach

Discussions about children's advocacy invariably begin by outlining the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a global legally binding agreement which outlines the fundamental rights of every child. The UNCRC constitutes the most comprehensive statement of children's rights ever produced and provides the bedrock for policy and practice for children's rights organisations worldwide. As outlined at the outset of this report, article 12 is particularly pertinent to the rights of young people to have a say and input into decisions which affect them. This right, as it pertains to care-experienced children and young people, is embedded in Irish legislation and policy and provides solid legal and policy foundations for organisations and services that engage with this group. Berlins articulates the importance of rights when he says:

> 'Once you know what your rights are you've got your little bit of soil on which you stand. You're not just a free-floating subject…You're somebody who has to be listened to' (Berlins cited in Dalrymple, 1997 p. 81).

Within the literature relating to advocacy, discussions of children's rights are prominent and are usually articulated in the context of policy which informs the rationale for advocacy. According to Quinn *et al.* a rights discourse is most effective when lobbying for changes at policy or systemic levels as 'a rights discourse clarifies the actors who have a duty to ensure these needs are met' (2017: 152). Rights provide leverage when trying to realise entitlements and mobilise those responsible for such provision.

However a focus on rights becomes less prominent in advocacy practice as it is operationalised at an individual level (Bendo 2020; Quinn *et al.*, 2017). Quinn *et al.* unpack this further in their research with young people transitioning out of care which highlighted that of primary importance to young people is the relationship and emotional support provided by a trusted adult. They conclude, whilst rights are important 'human experience and young people's own views…suggest that the more intangible emotional supports and a relationship with a supportive adult are key for successful transitions from care.' (Quinn *et al*, 2017: 152). This correlates with other research conducted with young service users

which emphasises the importance of relationship to them (Daly, 2012; Boylan and Ing, 2005; Dalrymple and Boylan 2013; Barnes, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2017; Winter, 2015).

The importance of supportive relationships

While upholding and realising the rights of young people is a key priority at policy and organisational levels within advocacy services, developing and maintaining supportive relationships with a trusted adult is a key priority for young people engaging with those services. As discussed previously in this report, many care-experienced young people find themselves with a dearth of adults in their lives who are there for them and who they can rely on to be in their corner. The centrality of relationship and support are very prominent themes arising in research that is carried out directly with children and young people in relation to their views and experiences of advocacy. Reed, herself a care-experienced person, says:

> 'Advocacy teams… are paramount to young people in the care system. Done right, these services have the potential to offer stable relationships in a young person's life, as was my experience.' (Reed, 2022)

Let us probe further as to the nature and particular aspects of relationships valued by young people in advocacy. In general, young people highlight the importance of the worker being a reliable and trusted adult in their lives (Barnes, 2012; Boylan & Ing 2005). They value being listened to and heard as very often their experiences are of not being listened to (Tierney *et al.*, 2017; Boylan & Ing, 2005; Jones, 2023) and for the young people interviewed in Thomas *et al.*'s study of independent advocacy services, *all* of them identified being listened to as a key and important outcome (2017). This finding is echoed in Barnes' study who found that young people 'particularly valued workers who were friendly, who treated them with respect and listening was key' (2012: 1279).

Being cared about is another aspect of the young person/worker relationship valued by young people in advocacy. Barnes (2007) reports that the majority of young people in her study appreciated the caring relationship encountered from advocacy rights workers. In her later paper exploring young people's experiences with both social workers and advocacy workers, young people identified being cared about by professionals was very important and they associated this with their advocates more than their social workers (Barnes 2012). They gave examples of workers remembering birthdays and other significant events as being very significant for them as demonstrations of care.

Research also highlights the importance of relationships being enduring and long term. Quinn *et al.* (2017) identify relationship and emotional continuity as central for those transitioning out of care and

also for these young people to receive continuing care and support. Young people interviewed in Boylan and Ing's research 'particularly valued the enduring nature of the relationship between the young person and the advocate' (2005: 8). Young people in their study who had experienced advocacy as being temporary and related to a specific issue or crisis that arose communicated that while they valued the advocate's expertise and input they felt they would value a long term relationship where the advocate was a support and friend rather than just consisting of a limited intervention (Boylan & Ing, 2005). In a recent review of children's social care in England, the Department for Education highlights the importance of independent advocacy and recommends that services aiming to support children in care and care leavers should aim to amend their design to allow for long-term relationships to be built (Department for Education, 2022).

Building effective relationships takes time (Ruch, 2018). Building trust and getting to know a person doesn't happen quickly, especially if either party has had difficult experiences in relationships where trust was broken or they have felt let down. Dalrymple and Boylan (2013) highlight how investing the time in building independent advocacy relationships is key. The National Standards for the Provision of Children and Young People's Advocacy Services in England sets out principles and practice expectations for advocacy provision. Standard One specifies that advocates must take time to build up a relationship with young people. In Ireland the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) sets out standards expected in advocacy which they state is a key element of all strands of health and social care. HIQA specifically identifies spending time and building relationship as a central element of advocacy practice (HIQA, 2023).

Barnes' research reveals that it is not just young people who see relationship and support as a priority within advocacy. In her study, advocacy workers interviewed also identified relationship as a core aspect of advocacy: 'Many (advocates) said that positive relationships with the young people were the most important element of their work' (2012: 1283). They also emphasised the importance of being available, reliable and not letting the young people down.

Building trusting relationships in advocacy lays a secure foundation for young people and facilitates other important dimensions of advocacy practice such as enabling participation and the realisation of young people's rights (McIlven *et al*., 2017; Henry *et al*. 2010). This is articulated by Boylan and Ing who state: 'The importance of the relationship was seen as underpinning effective and meaningful participation' (2005: 9).

Participation, Empowerment and Voice

According to Dalrymple and Boylan (2013), individual advocacy challenges the differences in power experienced by young people and the services and professionals they work with. Morgan refers to advocacy having a role in 'rebalancing equality' for the service user in the context of the service they are engaged with (2017: 31). A primary goal of advocacy is that care-experienced young people would be enabled to participate and have a say in the situations, decisions, and issues arising in their lives, as is their right. Dalrymple and Boylan (2013) point out that advocacy is especially important for those who find it difficult to have a voice and be heard in decision making. Care-experienced young people often find themselves subject to systems which operate in a way that works against the person having their voice heard, whether due to a lack of resources, time pressures, systemic structures or perhaps even an innate bias that seeks and values the views of professionals and adults first. Boylan and Ing's research concurs with this and claims that 'despite the rhetoric of participation and inclusion, the messages from young people in both studies were consistent. They have little opportunity for meaningful participation in decision-making' (2005: 11).

In Thomas *et al.*'s research (2017), improving participation and giving young people a voice emerged as one of the main themes in terms of important outcomes of advocacy. Whilst young people did identify getting their voices heard and having a greater involvement in decision-making as outcomes they valued, they also highlighted that it was advocates and other adult stakeholders that were more likely to highlight empowerment or the young person having their voices heard as being priorities in advocacy.

Bendo cautions against an approach that would see participation as an end in itself and takes a more critical approach that focuses on the voice of the young person, whether they were listened to and whether this resulted in meaningful participation in terms of responses and outcomes. She asserts that it is not just about the expression of voice, it's about these voices being 'heard and taken seriously' (2020: 219) and in her view they need to 'reach the decision-making level' (p.220). However she also cautions against relying on a singular model of participation as young people's cases and circumstances are unique and their wishes around participation vary.

Interestingly, while some young people in Thomas *et al.*'s (2017) study valued whether participation led to a desired outcome and issue resolution, actually most valued the relationship with their advocate irrespective of the achievement of desired change. Honesty and frankness were valued in terms of gaining an understanding of the issues and what was possible, what was not possible and the reasons why.

Independence

Independence of the advocate is crucial in order for young people to develop trust, know that the advocate is there just for them and representing their voice untainted by the responsibilities or agendas of other services and agencies. Advocates have a role, Morgan asserts, that cannot be undertaken by those working within the system of which the individual is a client, indeed he would go so far as to say that 'it is the independence within professional advocacy which gives meaning to the activity' (2017: 31). Bendo concurs with this and says that independence in advocacy is crucial in order to effectively serve young people, particularly where advocacy involves a challenge to other agencies involved in the person's life (2020). The National Standards for the Provision of Children and Young People's Advocacy Services in England stipulate that advocacy services must be completely independent and that this should be clear to all involved (Department for Education 2023: Standard 7). Chase and Kemmis, reporting on an evaluation of Voice advocacy services for children in care revealed that the independence of the advocate was seen as vitally important by young people in their service (2006). The advocates interviewed in Bendo's (2020) research spoke about the necessity of independence in their practice, and being free to just represent the young person's voice and views, even in situations where they themselves may not agree with the young person's perspective. The young person concerned is entitled to have their views represented and having their voice heard is the priority.

Sources of funding can be a complicating factor when operationalising a truly independent approach to advocacy (Dalrymple and Boylan, 2013), particularly when the funding comes from the government agency or department with a remit for providing care and services to the young people seeking advocacy. There is no neat answer to this; clearly, adequate resources and funding are essential for providing quality advocacy services. Interestingly some organisations have developed creative ways of acknowledging and ameliorating tensions in this regard. For example in Australia, one third of CREATE's funding is independent so it can research, advocate and lobby government and authorities on matters relating to care-experienced youth without compromise on issues (McDowall, 2016).

Knowledge and expertise

In order to support and empower young people to participate, have their voices heard and achieve agency in their journeys through the care system and afterwards, independent advocates need an in-depth level of knowledge and expertise pertaining to the issues arising for young people. Bendo (2020) highlights the importance of expertise in relation to navigating systems, legislation, and policies including knowledge in relation to children and young people's rights that are applicable in practice.

Knowledge of support services that their clients may benefit from being linked in with is important for the advocate when the young person needs intervention outside of the advocate's remit such as professional counselling or legal advice. The English National Standards for Provision of Children and Young People's Advocacy Services specify that to champion children and young people, advocates must have the requisite knowledge to carry out their role effectively. Regular training and continuous professional development should be a standard practice for agencies providing advocacy to care-experienced young people (Department for Education, 2023: Standard 5). In Ireland, HIQA outlines the requirement for advocates to have knowledge, particularly in relation to relevant legislation (HIQA, 2023).

Impact – Practical issues addressed

The outcome of advocacy in terms of practically addressing the issues that the child or young person wants support pursuing is a key aim of advocacy practice. In research carried out by Coram Voice and the NYAS (2022), young people identified issues with social workers, family contact, issues with school, concerns around carers and placements, and attending meetings as among the matters they wished their advocates to help with. In Thomas *et al.*'s (2017) study, young people highlighted issue resolution and practical changes as being important to them. However, even if their exact desired outcome wasn't achieved, they valued an explanation and an understanding of why it was not possible. For young people transitioning from care in Palmer *et al.*'s (2022) study, support around managing practical issues was important to them, although it should be noted that emotional support was a higher priority for them.

Advocacy – some broader considerations

There are a number of themes arising in the literature and research on independent advocacy with care-experienced young people that fall under the heading of 'broader considerations'. These include: the availability of advocacy; the accessibility of advocacy services; relationships between advocacy, related services and professionals; and wider impacts of advocacy.

Availability of advocacy

Much of the literature around advocacy calls for the service to be available to all young people in care and afterwards. Reed (2022) recommends that every child be automatically contacted by an advocate when they go into care. This is similar to key recommendations of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care final report (England) which states that the expectation should be that most young people in care experience independent advocacy and that all children in care are contacted and offered the service at key points in their lives (Department for Education, 2022). The recommendations

of this review are strengthened by the fact that independent advocacy is a legal right in England. Care-experienced young people who took part in Coram Voice and the NYAS research felt strongly that 'advocates needed to be able to be more proactive in contacting children and young people directly. This would enable all children and young people to have an advocate if they wanted one' (2022: 7). Dalrymple and Boylan promote advocacy being offered to all in care and give the example of Scotland where independent advocacy is enshrined in legislation in the spheres of mental health, disability, education (learning support) and patient care. In each of these contexts professionals are legally obliged to inform the individual of available advocacy services in their sector (2013: 155). Bendo (2020) argues that it is not adequate to say independent advocacy is 'rights based' without having legislative authority behind this and concludes that this constitutes best practice in this sector. In Ireland EPIC has been proactively campaigning for independent advocacy for care-experienced youth to be enshrined in Irish legislation and it has engaged actively in recent consultations around The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 on this issue.

Accessibility of advocacy services

It is important that advocacy services are accessible for the children and young people they aim to serve. Bendo (2020) highlights the need for advocacy services and advocates to be accessible both physically and online and makes the point that many advocacy services are hard to find and protected by locks and intercoms. She states, 'many institutions that are set up for children are often not designed with them in a child-friendly way.' (2020: 175). Accessibility is a significant theme in England's National Standards for Advocacy and stipulates that services should be physically accessible and advocacy should take place where the young person wishes (Standard 6). In addition to this it is vital that young people can access advocacy in a variety of ways, for example via freephone number, text, online (Standard 7). Boylan and Ing (2005) argue that not only should services be accessible in terms of location and ease of contact, they should also be proactive in targeting young people for whom the service exists including awareness raising about the service and how to access it. Promotion and awareness raising should also occur with related professionals and providers of care (2005: 9).

Specialist Advocacy

Discussion in relation to the accessibility of services leads to another theme highlighted in the literature. To best serve all children and young people in care, consideration needs to be given to particular issues and circumstances arising amongst this cohort. Chase and Kemmis (2006) point to the increasing complexity of issues that young people seek advocacy around and discuss the development of specialist advocacy teams to provide expert support to these groups. Such specialisms may include

expertise in relation to mental health, disability, young people from particular ethnic backgrounds, and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. In an Irish context, Corbett and Coulter in their recent report specifically mention the needs of care-experienced young people who become parents themselves, young people with a disability and young international protection applicants as being groups that are emerging more prominently in Irish legal care proceedings (2024). The provision of specialist advocacy is also a recommendation arising out of both Boylan and Ing's (2005) and Bendo's research (2020). Wood (2017) concurs with this and emphasises the importance of advocacy agencies collecting relevant data in order to identify what specialist expertise may be needed in order to provide the best support.

Relationships between services and professionals

The nature of relationships between advocacy providers and other professionals and agencies involved in the care of children and young people has a significant impact on the potential efficacy of the work carried out (Ruch, 2018). According to Bendo (2020), these relationships are at the centre of good practice and are the key to achieving goals of advocacy whilst also serving to enhance knowledge and practice for all parties. Relationships with social workers in particular are discussed by Boylan and Ing (2005) who emphasise that the role of social workers and individual advocates can be complimentary to each other and an asset in responding to the needs of services users for the improvement of their situations. They also highlight the key role for social workers in knowing when their clients would benefit from individual advocacy and be proactive in linking the person with such a service. In setting out standards for health and social care professionals in Ireland, HIQA states that staff have a responsibility to identify the need for independent advocacy, support access to this and work in partnership with advocates in order to support the individual they are working with (HIQA, 2023).

Wider impacts of advocacy

Advocacy can occur at different levels including at the individual (one to one) level and at the systemic level which involves advocating for change at local, regional or national levels. This report primarily discusses individual advocacy but it is important to consider advocacy at these broader levels too. Issues affecting society in general can have an even more profound impact on care-experienced young people. In addition to the difficult life circumstances necessitating their coming into care, many additional disadvantages are foisted upon them by virtue of an under-resourced care system and wider social service deficits impacting Irish society as a whole such as accommodation shortages, and mental health and disability services that are under resourced and very difficult to access. In Wood's study (2017), issues that young people needed advocacy around included housing, finance, education and

disability. The Tusla Advisory Group (TAG), an advisory group of care leavers in Ireland, raised similar issues in their 2021 report. They identified that accommodation, education and finance were the key challenges for them (TAG, 2021). Young people in Quinn *et al.*'s (2017) research particularly highlighted accessing housing as a challenge for them. These are all systemic issues that go beyond the individual.

In their exploration of the impacts of advocacy services for care-experienced young people, Thomas *et al.* identify the wider impacts of advocacy as being harder to measure but nevertheless arising as a strong theme in their research. Specifically, they state that advocacy can make a difference to cultures of decision-making. In this regard they say, 'For both advocates and stakeholders, a key impact was on decision-making culture, in putting children and young people at the centre of decision-making processes and ensuring that their views and wishes are taken into account' (2017: 371). Gaps in services and policy identified through advocacy can highlight changes that are needed at service, policy and legislative levels. Care-experienced young people involved in the Tusla Advisory Group stated that they want more involvement and influence at a policy level (TAG, 2021). Advocacy agencies are optimally placed to lobby on these issues as they have an informed awareness gained from their direct work with service users.

Conclusion

This section has provided a review of the issues and themes arising in research and literature in relation to individual advocacy for care-experienced children and young people. Themes of rights, relationship and support, independence, participation, knowledge and impact all arose as central tenets of good advocacy practice. Broader issues as they arose in the literature were also explored such as availability, access, specialist advocacy, relationships at service provider level and the wider impacts of advocacy. For young people with care experience a clear message emerged: in terms of their priorities in advocacy they value support, care and enduring relationship. From this foundation, other important dimensions of advocacy develop such as empowerment, participation and the young person's voice being heard.

The research process – How we carried out the research

The research methodology employed in this project was qualitative in nature and used a mixed methods approach in order to explore and gather data regarding participants' experiences and views in relation to advocacy.

Aim

The aim of the research was to review EPIC's provision of independent advocacy services to children in care and young care-leavers in light of national and international best practice in the provision of direct advocacy to care-experienced youth.

Research Objectives

The research objectives included the following:

- To undertake a literature review of existing research and practice in relation to the delivery of independent advocacy services to care-experienced children and young people.
- To explore the experiences and perspectives of care-experienced young people (18+) that have used EPIC's Advocacy Service.
- To explore the perspectives of EPIC advocates and members of EPIC's management team regarding advocacy provision.
- To undertake consultations with key stakeholders in the field of advocacy service provision.
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of EPIC's existing advocacy service provision.
- To propose recommendations for the development of a best practice model of independent advocacy delivery for children in care and young care-leavers in Ireland.

Research Participants

Research was carried out between July and November 2024 with four cohorts: young care-experienced adults who are or have been service users of the EPIC National Advocacy service (n=11); Advocates employed by EPIC in their National Advocacy service (n=10); EPIC's management team with responsibility for the delivery of services (n=6); and key stakeholders in the field of advocacy service provision (n=17). All those involved were provided with information regarding the project and consent was explained to and granted by each participant.

Young adults: The young adult cohort were invited to participate in the research project by the advocacy team and those who chose to do so took part in one-to-one online interviews with the author. Care was taken to ensure all research materials (information, consent form, interview questions) were relatable for this group and EPIC's Youth Council were consulted and advised on this. In addition, all young adults were offered additional engagement with EPIC support personnel who were on hand for the duration of the interviews if participants felt they would benefit from this.

Advocates and EPIC management: Members of EPIC's advocacy team and EPIC's management group took part in the research by documenting their views via an online survey. This was conducted via MS Forms.

Stakeholders: The stakeholders who took part in the research were from three distinct groups. The first cohort were organisations who provide equivalent advocacy services to young people with care experience. Two such organisations within the British Isles region took part in focus group interviews (n=10).

The second group consisted of staff (n=5) from an advocacy organisation in Ireland that provides advocacy to adults within a different sector.

The third stakeholder cohort consisted of senior management personnel in Tusla and comprised of two individual interviews.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed and the data gained from each cohort was analysed using thematic analysis. The themes arising in this process were further analysed in light of key findings in the literature review regarding effective practice in this field.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct this research was sought and granted by both the Tusla Research Ethics Committee and the Social Research Ethics Committee in University College Cork. Particular consideration was given to ensuring the safety and well-being of the young adult participants by emphasising the voluntary nature of their involvement and assuring them that their participation or non-participation would have no impact on services received from EPIC or Tusla. Also, given that young people may be discussing aspects of their lives that have been difficult for them, an EPIC support person (who wasn't their advocate) was available to them during and after their interview if they chose to avail of this. Confidentiality and anonymity of participant contributions were maintained and each participant was afforded the opportunity to discontinue their involvement at any point or to withdraw their contribution up to two weeks after the interview/survey/focus group was conducted.

empowering people in care

Exploring Advocacy- What did we find out in our research?

A primary focus of this research was to identify key elements of advocacy in terms of what participants viewed as the most important aspects of the process. Strengths and weakness of the service were also investigated and areas for improvement identified. The research probed the role of the advocate in terms of how it is distinct from the role of other professionals. The impact of advocacy was also explored and participants were also asked to consider what constitutes advocacy being successful or unsuccessful. Finally how the issues identified and key research findings might inform a model of advocacy within EPIC was examined.

In this research 11 young adults were interviewed, 10 advocates and six members of EPIC's management team completed a written questionnaire, 17 individuals from stakeholder groups took part in a combination of focus groups and interviews. 10 of these were from two equivalent advocacy organisations, five were from an advocacy service providing advocacy in a different context and two individuals were from Tusla senior management.

Advocacy – what's MOST important?

Participants were asked what they saw as the *most* important aspect of advocacy. This was in order to gain an insight into the priorities for each group in terms of advocacy provision. This was an open question so the responses were not prompted in any way. The diagram below outlines the responses of young people, advocates and management.

Most important elements of advocacy

Young Adults (11):

- Support 64%
- Knowledge 36%

Advocates (10):

- Relationship 60%
- Empowerment 20%
- Voice 10%
- Independence 10%

Management:

- Empowerment 83%
- Voice 17%

Supportive relationship

The young adults interviewed were asked what element of advocacy was the most important or that they valued most. The majority (64%) identified support as the most important element for them and spoke about this mainly in terms of emotional support in the context of a trusted relationship and it also included practical support. They spoke about the fact that other young people have the support of their families but they don't have these natural networks so having an advocate who is just there for them was invaluable. One young woman says:

> "It was good to just kind of have another person in my corner… I was in care and I had lots of troubles then so I think it was kind of good to have someone…yeah, I think that was good, having some sort of like impartialish person."

Another young person states:

> "I suppose the thing that I value most about it would be, to be honest, is having that support network that I think the advocate role fulfils in that you have somebody who is always there to listen to you…it's just that support network that I think maybe for other children will be fulfilled through family, whereas I think the EPIC advocate fulfils that support function as well, which I think is very important because I think what it did was it gave me the space and the energy to keep moving forward, especially with my education, whereas I really do feel if I didn't have the advocate I would have burned myself out."

Having someone who's there to share the load was highlighted by this young person:

> "The most important thing is the support, is like knowing that I have someone that is there for me and like is on my side and helps me to understand whatever is going on in my situation. Yeah, I really value that there. Whenever there's anything that comes up, it's not as heavy on me. It's like, I know that I have this help and support."

The young adults identified the teenage years and transitioning to adulthood as being a particularly challenging time, especially when in the care system or having left care. Having their advocate as a consistent, reliable adult was, and continues to be, really important. They specified the issues that their advocate supported them around:

> My advocate in particular respects me for who I am and he never judges me in any way. He takes the time to support me. Even something small like, you know, he's always there… He's been supporting me at my network meetings. He's been supporting me back in the past and

> when I had court cases after having my child. I really appreciate everything he's helped me with and will probably help me with down the line if I am stuck again like you know.

Another young person states:

> "It's like being a team, more like to help you to progress. Just regular things from a day-to-day basis: meetings, fostering meetings, court meetings, court meetings especially.
>
> And just to be there, to emotionally secure you."

These quotes also reveal that another dimension of the support received by the young adults was being able to link in with their advocates at times of particular need. Three young people spoke about having met their advocate when they were younger but didn't have a need at that point, but when issues arose at a later stage they were able to get back in contact with them. For one person this was when she became pregnant, for another it was when he wanted to get his files through Freedom of Information.

As well as being able to access the support of their advocate when particular issues arose, the young adults also highlighted their appreciation of their advocates 'checking in' with them, for example around exam results/college offers, a significant medical appointment or the period after receiving one's files:

> "You wouldn't have a parent calling in and checking in on you or things like that. So I do like that aspect that (my advocate) does. instead of things having to go bad for you to then reach out 'cause then it's kind of hard at that point like my CAO stuff. I didn't get my thing, I didn't call anyone obviously because that's embarrassing, but (my advocate) called me and was like, did you get your course? And I was like, oh, no, I didn't. And then I was able to tell her the problem."

This young person may not have made contact with their advocate as they were embarrassed at not receiving their college offer. However the advocate being mindful of what was going on for this young person and checking in meant they could share the disappointment and work on a way forward together.

Another young person explained the value of their advocate checking in:

> "That would be the biggest thing, especially for somebody who's been in care and who might not have somebody to reach out to, having somebody there to go through the things with you and also for after for a check in. Like for the Freedom of Information, I could have done that on

my own, but it would be better to have (my advocate) there to check in when I do get my files you know that everything was OK and to talk through things."

This young person highlights the importance of their advocate's support not only around the process of acquiring their files but also checking in afterwards to support them process what their files revealed.

Another young woman spoke about becoming unwell and spending time in hospital. Consequently, she was not able to continue in education and therefore lost her aftercare supports including accommodation and ended up in homeless services. She expressed feeling 'thrown out' with no support. Her advocate visited her while she was in hospital and this meant a huge amount to her as an expression of support and care in a situation where she felt completely cut adrift.

This theme of 'checking in' is not unique to the young adults in this research. In research conducted by a Tusla Advisory Group of care leavers, young people also emphasised that they wished their workers would check in with them more often and not leave it just up to the young person (Tusla Advisory Group (TAG), 2021).

Many of the young adults interviewed referred to the fact that they don't have family networks of support that other young people would have. This is consistent with other research, as Palmer (2022) points out that in today's society many young people are living with their parents well into their third decade.

The overall finding of support being the valued by most of the young adults interviewed is strongly reflected in other research also (Daly, 2012; Boylan and Ing, 2005; Dalrymple and Boylan 2013; Barnes, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2017) and is succinctly summed up by a young person in Palmer's research who states:

> 'Support, support, support. That's all people really need when they are in care, you know, coming out of care. They just need constant support and knowing that someone's there for them' (2022: 756).

The importance of support and relationship was not only highly valued by the young adults interviewed, this theme was also identified as a key priority for the advocates. A majority (60%) stated that relationship was the most important element of advocacy for them. They expressed this in terms of the importance of relationship building, caring, listening, having respect for the young person and not being judgemental. Staff in one of the stakeholder organisations interviewed who provide equivalent advocacy services for care-experienced people unanimously identified 'relationship' as

being the most important element of advocacy for them. This was also reflected in the focus group with the advocacy service in a different sector where one member stated:

> "Relationship is the absolute epicentre and fundamental aspect of the basis of any good advocacy work. It can't happen without this… you can't provide good advocacy and not have a relationship established of trust, of understanding how the person communicates, understanding the context in which things are happening for them, and that takes time. That's very precious to advocacy - having adequate time to develop relationships."

This sentiment is also expressed by the workers in Barnes's study (2012), many of whom cited positive relationships with young people as being the most important element of their work.

Knowledge and expertise

The next most important element identified by young adults was the knowledge and expertise that the advocate brings to the process, specifically in relation to the care system and how to navigate it.

> "Having somebody there that has a background in it and actually knows how these things go. Like (my advocate) would know when I'm reaching out to somebody like he'd know…what works and what doesn't work, whereas I'm just reaching out, not knowing the right way to go about it."

One young woman said while she likes to find things out herself, she really values her advocate's help in sourcing information she doesn't have or can't access:

> "I really appreciate when I tell her something and like, if she doesn't know she'll be like, OK, I'll go find out and then, like, bring me resources and things that I mightn't necessarily be able to find out for myself… So that's probably the biggest help.
>
> Yeah, that's probably the biggest help because I do like to do things by myself…because if you want something done, you kind of have to do it yourself. But there's been cases where it's been good, she's been able to get information that I might not necessarily be able to have."

Another young person referred to their youth and their appreciation of their advocate's knowledge:

> "She does think of stuff that I wouldn't even think of. Like 'cause, obviously like I'm 18, I don't know a lot of things."

In responding to the question regarding strengths of advocacy in EPIC, the knowledge and expertise of the EPIC advocacy team was highlighted in 50% of the management team responses and 40% of the

advocates' responses. Respondents specifically identified the diverse professional backgrounds of the team and the wealth of experience they have built up over the years. One of the management responses states:

> "They hold a wealth of knowledge between them which benefits the service in terms of tackling a variety of issues and concerns."

Among the advocate group, the resource that the team members are to each other was referred to:

> "(We) support each other, share knowledge and learning from our practice experiences… Supporting each other's work is critical to expanding and developing our skill base, knowledge base and evidence base."

Advocates highlighted the type of knowledge salient to their practice as being:

> "A good and up to date knowledge base re Children's Rights, current legislation and the issues presenting for young people."

Another states:

> "The advocate must have an understanding of the care system (legislation and policy pertaining to care) as well as the structures and hierarchies within Tusla and other relevant government bodies."

This knowledge of the system is important,

> "…so you know where the advocacy will be most effective."

The importance of advocate knowledge regarding young people's rights was highlighted by both stakeholder organisations providing equivalent advocacy services and they referred to that knowledge not only being important for their direct work with young people but also for other professionals who may not be clear on what the rights of the young person were. One of the organisations has a helpline and many of the calls received were from other professionals seeking information and clarity around the rights of children in care.

The necessity of advocacy services and advocates having the requisite expertise in order to best support and empower the young people they work with is a theme arising in Boylan and Ing's (2005) research. This is also highlighted by both Bendo (2020) and Chase and Kemmis (2006) who emphasise the importance of advocates having knowledge in relation to navigating systems, legislation, policies, children's rights, and knowledge relating to different groups of young people such as indigenous

ethnic groups, migrants, and those with disabilities. As we can see from the advocates' responses, it is not only important to have the expertise and knowledge pertaining to the care system and issues arising for young people, it is also important to know how this can most effectively be used.

Empowerment, participation and voice

Empowerment was seen as the most important element of advocacy by 83% of management and 20% of advocates. Clearly for the management group at EPIC it is a top priority in terms of a focus for the advocacy service. For the advocates it was the second most highly rated element after relationship (60%). Respondents spoke about the importance of advocacy leading to the young person having a stronger sense of agency in their own lives to influence their circumstances for the better and be a strong advocate for themselves. The data highlighted that a key aspect of empowerment is enabling children and young people to express their views and have them considered by those responsible for their care and care planning.

Whilst for advocates, empowerment was cited as the most important element of advocacy for just 20%, the principle of empowerment was represented in the advocate data as a core value of the service with 80% identifying it as such. This emerged in another section of the advocate survey where they were asked about the *values* which informed their advocacy practice. The advocates articulated empowerment in terms of being guided by a principle that would seek to support young people around advocacy issues with a view to them developing the knowledge and confidence to self-advocate. In the stakeholder cohort, this sentiment was expressed by the advocacy organisation in a different sector, one member stating:

> "You're empowering the person's own ability to advocate for themselves or to build their capacity to self-advocate."

Interestingly the concepts of empowerment or participation did not arise in the young adults' data. It wasn't the language they used. However they did speak about their advocate supporting them in meetings, at court appearances, in gaining access to files and accessing other support services that they needed. A couple referred to the advocate sharing the load in relation to their engagements with Tusla and other agencies. These activities could be conceived as vehicles of empowerment and participation, however the young people interviewed did not explicitly make this link. This finding is similar to that in Thomas *et al.*'s (2017) study where adult professionals were more likely to highlight empowerment as a significant outcome of advocacy.

Closely related to the concepts of participation and empowerment is that of voice. This arose as the most important element of advocacy for 10% of advocates and 17% of management. This was framed in terms of ensuring the young person's voice is heard and the role of the advocate in promoting and amplifying the voice of the child or young person.

Of note is that the concept of voice arose as a very strong theme when advocates were asked what for them would indicate advocacy was a success. A strong majority of them (80%) referred to the young person's voice being heard and young people felt they were listened to, even if the outcome wasn't what they were seeking, as being the main indicator that their engagement with the service was successful.

Whilst young people did not overtly mention empowerment or participation, some did refer to advocates helping their voice to be heard. One young person says:

> "It was always my EPIC worker that was able to like advocate my voice for me."

Another describes how her advocate helps her communicate her views in meetings:

> "I appreciate the most like her being able to come to these meetings and like, talk for me when sometimes I wouldn't be able to express myself. Say if I was like overwhelmed or something she'd call me out and she'd be like, OK, I'll say it for you. Tell me what to say or like I'd write it down and she'd read it out for me. She's been very helpful in that kind of way."

Another young woman spoke about communicating with Tusla about an issue but getting no reply, but when her advocate emailed the issue was responded to. She says:

> "But she'll like, e-mail them and stuff 'cause they didn't answer my e-mail, but anyways.
> So even though I'm just as important as (advocate) and my emails should be respected as well, absolutely, it was good that she was able to also contact them."

This demonstrates the role of advocacy in elevating the voice of the young person in an effort to ensure it is heard and action taken. Even though this young person knew her voice was important, just as important as her advocate's, the reality was that it took her advocate's email to get a response.

This is reflective of a strong theme that arose in one of the equivalent agency stakeholder's focus groups. Participants spoke about the importance of representing the young person's voice: 'it's not

your voice it's their voice', but also in tandem with that is the concept of 'audience'. It's important that the advocate is able to access the decision-makers:

> "Having the right audience or access to the decision-makers …It's like there's no point in having the young person's voice if you don't have access to those people."

Elevating young people's voice and ensuring they are heard are key outcomes of advocacy in Thomas *et al.* (2017) and Boylan and Dalrymple's (2009) research where it is represented as a core dimension of advocacy with children and young people.

The **independence** of advocacy is the final element that was identified as being the most important with 10% of advocates identifying it as such. However this theme will be addressed in the next section of the report which addresses what distinguishes the advocate's role from other professionals as it is one of the primary factors arising in that discussion.

How is the advocate's role distinct?

This diagram summarises the main points raised by the young adults, advocates and management group in response to being asked how the role of the advocate differs from others.

Advocate role as distinct from other professionals

Young adults:

- "Very different!
- Advocates are available, reliable, have more respect and patience. They don't judge, they're independent, not part of the system and just represent the young person's voice
- Social workers are so busy, they're unavailable and 'tell you what you can and can't do'
- When social work is closed and aftercare gone, the advocate is still there for you.

Advocates:

- Independent from state system
- Young people have choice
- Youth led based on young people's voice
- Sometimes slight overlap with aftercare

Management:

- Independence of advocate from state system
- Choice of young people to engage

All three groups saw the advocate's role as being quite distinct from the roles of other professionals such as social workers, after-care workers and GALs (Guardian Ad Litem). The young adult group were the most emphatic about this and from their perspective the advocate's role was very different. For

them, the main factor setting it apart was the nature of the relationship they had with their advocates compared to other professionals. In their experience, their advocates were available, dependable, they felt respected by them and not judged:

> "They understand a bit more … and they kind of have more patience, so they actually respect you for who you are. Like they all do, but my advocate in particular respects me for who I am, and he never judges me in any way like."

One young man stated an advocate is:

> "Somebody who has that professional expertise to build up a relationship with the child. Allowing enough time, I guess, to build up trust."

Another describes her advocate's role:

> "She doesn't like put in like rules and like tell you that you have to do this and that you have to do that like she's just there for me and she's like supportive and stuff like, that's what I appreciate the most, like her being able to come to these meetings and like, talk for me when sometimes I wouldn't be able to express myself."

The advocate being 'in the middle' was important to this young adult:

> "They're always in the middle for you…even though your social worker, she's on your side as well. But she's (advocate) still in the middle, Like, let's say, whenever I was going through a difficult time, whenever I was transitioning from childhood to adulthood it wasn't great. I went through a really difficult time and she was there to stand in the middle. It was looking like just so crazy and she was in the middle to still support me."

> "There's a lot of responsibility on your side, but whenever the person is in the middle, you still have all that responsibility, but it just makes it easier to bear."

A few young adults referred to the long-term nature of the advocacy relationship and highlighted that when their social work case is closed and they move on from aftercare, their advocate remained the one consistent adult right through, who is there for them. This finding chimes with a similar sentiment in Boylan and Ing's (2005) study which highlights the significance of an enduring, long-term relationship within advocacy.

The group were quite pragmatic when reflecting on their interactions with social workers. Many of them acknowledged the large caseloads and consequent lack of availability and time:

> "And then in terms of their own workload, I just don't think they have capacity. A lot of social workers, they're dealing with like multiple cases at one time. It's that relationship piece has been compromised because of how much social workers are being put under pressure in their caseloads."

Another young man observed:

> "Sometimes the social worker, they're so busy, they don't have time to go to everyone's case, do you know? I have two or three friends, they've been calling them for like 2-3 weeks. They even don't pick up their calls."

They saw the role of social workers as being about making decisions and informing them about what was going to happen:

> "I see like a big difference because like social workers usually only tell you like what you can do and what you can't do and what placement you're moved to and so on."

Wood, reflecting on the social work role, observes that, 'as social work has become more bureaucratic and focused on case management, overstretched social workers are unable to take on the role of listening to children' (2017: 135). For young people in Barnes's study (2012), being listened to was closely linked with feeling cared about. Also being easy to contact and being responsive was important to them. They reported experiencing this with their advocates but not with social workers. Barnes reflects on social workers' 'changed role from active involvement in work with young people to management of their care' (2012: 1284). Social workers in her study felt curtailed by the lack of resources, time and personnel with many feeling they weren't able to do their job properly or operationalise caring dimensions of their work with children and young people. This frustration is also noted by Pascoe (2024) who discusses the impact of bureaucracy and managerialism on the social work role.

Independence

Across all three groups in EPIC, the independence of the advocate was a key factor distinguishing them from other professionals. It was seen as very important that they were not part of the system that was responsible for managing and providing care. One young adult describes it thus:

> "I would have the social worker who's part of the whole system, Tusla and a (after-care accommodation) worker who's also a little part of the whole system. And then my EPIC worker would be outside of that. I think it was kind of good to have someone that wasn't like necessarily in Tusla. So yeah, I think that was good."

Another young person articulates that other professionals are part of systems that impose a lot of constraints and the advocate being outside of that enables them just to represent the child's wishes or views:

> "(Other professionals) are dealing with kind of that broken system day in and day out. Whereas I think the EPIC advocate, their function is more like a magnifier of the child or like a mirror. Their job is to magnify the child in that situation, so they're not taking into account the culture, they're not taking into account the limited resources, they're just taking into account, this is what the child needs, this is what the child wants. …They (other professionals) obviously want to elevate that child to 100%, to do the best that they can for that child. But I think there are just institutional constraints, maybe, which the EPIC advocate can mitigate is what I would say."

Another young person sets out her experience of her advocate's role:

> "Like, she's been very helpful in that kind of way. Whereas, I didn't have my social worker being able to speak for me or my Guardian ad Litem, like, being able to speak for me. It was always like my EPIC worker that was able to advocate my voice for me."

Both the advocacy team and management in EPIC highlighted the independence of advocacy as being a significant and important dimension to the service that enables them to both represent and support young people to communicate their views. Reflecting on EPIC's unique position in relation to their work with the young person, one advocate explains:

> "We are able to be independent of the decision-making process, offer a genuine impartial service with no agenda. …It is always about the young person and striving for the best possible outcome for them in a practical and collaborative solution focused way and ensuring that the bottom line is achieved - that the young person is heard and their views are listened to and taken seriously."

Of the management group, two thirds (66%) cited independence as a defining characteristic of the advocate's role:

> "An advocate works for the child or young person only. They are not a decision maker, they are independent of the State, and a child can choose to work with an advocate or not."

Bendo's study underscores the importance of independence in advocacy. This is articulated by one of her respondents: 'independence is crucial because it grants the (advocacy) office power, authority and independence from government systems that are often under scrutiny within the advocate's individual and systemic work' (2020: 143). Chase and Kemmis (2006) also cite independence as an essential dimension of advocacy from young people's perspective.

A note of caution in relation to the independence of advocacy was raised in the responses of young adults and advocates. Reference was made to the importance of advocacy operating in a manner that is independent of Tusla (its primary funder) and being seen to be so. There was a concern among some respondents that EPIC was at risk of being viewed as too closely aligned with the Child and Family Agency. This issue was raised by one young adult (9%) and 30% of advocates. One young person, with specific reference to EPIC's social media presence stated:

> "I would say you need to demonstrate that you're very independent of Tusla. Which I don't think EPIC does quite well. So I think EPIC needs to set themselves apart and I think they are very well able to do that without compromising on any working relationship with Tusla. …That's easier said than done, of course, but I definitely think in terms of encouraging young people to get in contact with the service that you need to really demonstrate that EPIC is independent."

Concern in relation to EPIC's independence did not arise at management level in EPIC and from the perspective of Tusla management the relationship was seen as very positive:

> "I think they have been real partners. Not afraid to be critical when they needed to be, and certainly have empowered young people to be very critical of some of the services they received, but also to create an environment where we've been able to respond to that and have a dialogue about it and be part of the solution with the young people concerned. And I think that's very positive.
>
> Our funding of EPIC is important, that they do have an element of independence. They do have an ability to criticise. There is a voice to be heard there. I think that's really important."

Another Tusla manager, when asked about EPIC's most significant contributions to the sector stated:

> "I think for me, first thing is that it is independent. I think the second thing, which is connected to this, is the fact that EPIC is an organisation that is really valued by children and young people in care and those with care experience, I think brings, you know, credibility. I think it brings that sense of trust. And I mean that from the perspective of the young people who use the service."

As discussed in the literature review, tensions around independence in relation to funding bodies, or perceptions of potential conflicts of interest are not uncommon in the advocacy service space where independence is a foundational principle (Dalrymple and Boylan, 2009; McDowall, 2016). There are no neat solutions to this, however ongoing discussion, awareness and healthy debate are constructive.

Another element identified by participants considering the role of the advocate vis a vis other professionals was the dimension of choice. An advocate points out:

> "It is always their choice to engage with an EPIC advocate, they do not have the same choice regarding the other professionals that are allocated to them."

Another states:

> "A young person has the choice to engage with the Advocacy Service, in comparison to other professions, it is voluntary on the young person's behalf. Young people can self-refer into EPIC."

Young people valued the sense of agency they have with their engagement with the service:

> "I think social workers are completely different because, you know, like an advocate, they only know as much as you're willing to tell them. Like they don't know your background, like everything, your family. Yeah, like, they only know kind of as much as you tell them."

Another describes it thus:

> "EPIC, they're really good and they'll listen to you. They'll only act on what instructions you have given them. They're not going to have any conversations without your knowledge. All of these are good things."

Finally, some respondents alluded to there being a slight overlap between aftercare workers and advocates. However it was also point out by a young adult that not everyone (including themselves) has an aftercare worker. It was also pointed out in the advocates' survey that sometimes a young

person will choose to work with their advocate if a relationship with other professionals has broken down or if they are without a particular professional in post (e.g. unallocated a social worker).

Conclusion

Overall two main factors emerged from the data exploring the role of the advocate and what made it distinct from that of other professionals involved in the child or young person's life. These are; the nature of the relationship between the advocate and young person and the fact that the advocate is independent and not aligned with the other services, particularly statutory services involved in the young person's journey through the care system and afterwards. For young people the relationship dimension was at the forefront of their responses. The fact that the service is voluntary and it is entirely up to the young person to decide whether they engage was also seen by EPIC staff and management as an important feature.

Advocacy – what are the strengths and what could be improved?

All respondents were asked what they saw as the strengths and weaknesses of advocacy in EPIC and what they thought could be improved. In terms of the strengths, the issues raised relate primarily to the nature of the relationship between young person and advocate, the independence of advocacy and being there just for the young person, the expertise and commitment of the advocacy team, and the overall commitment and support within EPIC for the advocacy service. This is represented in the diagram below.

Strengths of advocacy in EPIC

Young adults:

- The relationship with advocate based on trust and being there just for them (**independence**)
- Being able to link back in when needed (**choice**)
- Having the **support** of a trusted, reliable and consistent adult, especially during the difficult teenage years and the transition to adulthood
- The **expertise** of the advocate especially in relation to the care system
- **Practical** support in addressing issues and having **voice** heard

Advocates:

- Young people are at the centre of the service (**independence and voice**)
- High level of experience and **commitment** of advocacy staff (**expertise**)
- EPIC management and systems

Managers:

Commitment and experience of the advocacy team (**expertise**)

The young adult group specified the trusting relationship they had with their advocates and the fact that the advocate was there just for them independent of other services, were key strengths for them. They also highlighted, as a strength, the fact that they could link back in with their advocate when needed and it was their choice whether to do so. Some spoke about their teenage years and transition to adulthood being particularly turbulent and having an advocate who was reliable and consistent made a huge difference for them. The advocate's knowledge of the system and their expertise were seen by this group as a strength, in addition to the practical support they received in addressing issues and ensuring their voice was heard in the process. The advocates identified the fact that children and young people are at the centre of the service, which represents them and elevates their voice as a key strength. They also specified the support and management structures in EPIC as a strength of the service which enabled them to practice in a focused and supported manner. In addition to this, the advocate group recognised the wealth of knowledge and high levels of commitment they bring to the advocacy process as practitioners. This was echoed strongly in the management group's survey who identified the dedication, commitment and expertise of the advocacy team as being the primary strengths of the service.

In terms of what the research data highlighted could be improved, there were quite cohesive views articulated, by the young adults in particular, in this regard. The following diagram summarises the main points made by young adults, advocates and management in response to this question.

What could be improved?

Young Adults:

- Very high level of satisfaction and appreciation of advocacy
- Strongest feedback (91%) was that very few young people know about EPIC advocacy, and they need to know so they can avail of the service too
- Particular concern expressed for those with specific challenges - mental health, disability, parenthood
- More opportunities to meet other care experienced YP (28%) - peer support, peer education and group advocacy
- Increased lobbying and influence around issues esp housing (36%)
- Concern re alignment with Tusla esp online (95%)

Advocates:

- A lot of external challenges identified relating to social work and specialist services

- Need greater uptake and promotion of advocacy
- Need to reach more young people in foster care
- More advocates
- More staff with care experience
- Concern re alignment with Tusla

Managers:

Need a distinct model of advocacy - a consistent standardised approach that can develop in light of social change and emerging complex issues affecting young people.

More young people need to know!

Overall, among the young adult cohort, there was a very high level of satisfaction with and appreciation of the advocacy service in EPIC. However, there was a considerable level of concern for other young people in care and how they could benefit from advocacy if they knew about it. The strongest dimension of the young adult's feedback regarding how advocacy in EPIC could be improved was their view that not enough people in care / with care experience know about the EPIC advocacy service. This was mentioned, unprompted, by 91% of those interviewed.

> "I think a lot of people didn't actually know about EPIC. Like, yeah, I don't think a lot of people know about it because, like, I know cases where like kids in care wouldn't have any clue."

Another young adult says:

> "They could definitely do with like putting it out there more. Like loads of people actually don't know about EPIC. And when I mention it, there's so many people that actually still don't know that it exists. Yeah. There's lots of kids. Like, there's lots. I'm sure there's lots of kids, like teenagers, nearly adults that like could benefit from the service but don't know that it's there and they don't know that it is open to everybody."

One young person referencing the experiences of unaccompanied minors in Ireland says:

> "There's a lot of young people they don't know about them (EPIC)… here in Ireland, there's like a lot of kids, you know, like young people. They're staying at home all the time, and they're doing nothing 'cause. They have no idea what to do… So maybe if they get paper things to the kids, they will know there's like someone that can help you… So like in every house they give it to them, that will be nice for them."

The young adult respondents had a clear view that independent advocacy should be made available to all young people in care and that they should have a choice as to whether and when they availed of it or not:

> "Well, I think advocacy is really, really good and it's such an amazing support. So, if anything, it would be to make it available to more people. I don't know how much people it's available to or anything. I think the best thing is just make it available for people. Like if you don't know about it, let them know like this is available.
> And let's say some people don't want it at the start to go back, maybe after a while to talk to them about it and just talk to them and help them to understand what it is."

Another states:

> "I'd probably make it available to everybody. I could make it kind of mandatory that everybody has the option. That if we don't want to use it, you just opt out. But that it is there for you."

The view that every care-experienced young person should be entitled to have the option of independent advocacy is reflective of debates within the research (Thomas *et al.*, 2017; Bendo, 2020; Dalrymple and Boylan, 2013), and EPIC's campaign around advocacy being a right which should be enshrined in legislation, thus entitling all young people in care to the service if they wish to avail of it.

The theme of a lack of knowledge of and access to advocacy arose early on in the research process with the young adult group, so a new question was introduced within their interviews regarding how they themselves found out about and got in touch with an EPIC advocate. It was felt that this would be important to know in terms of how EPIC has become known to those engaged with the service and whether this would provide some helpful data regarding how the service could be promoted. Of those who responded to this question (n=10), two were told about EPIC by their social worker, two by their aftercare worker, one person's foster carer put them in touch, for another young person it was a residential staff member, an Irish Refugee Council support worker put one person in touch and for another it was a Family Resource Centre worker. Another young person was informed of EPIC through the Children's Rights Alliance and another was told by a friend in care.

How did you find out about advocacy in EPIC?

- Social worker 20%
- Aftercare worker 20%

- Foster carer (IFCA) 10%
- Residential staff 10%
- Family resource centre 10%
- Irish Refugee Council 10%
- Friend in care 10%
- Children's Rights Alliance 10%

As is apparent by the above diagram young people found out about EPIC in many varied ways. Perhaps if there is a commonality, it could be individuals that the young people had relationships with in a variety of settings. It is also important to note that some young people found out about EPIC from one source but it was actually someone else who put them in touch by making a call for them. This was the case for one young person whose social worker told her about EPIC and she mentioned this to her guidance counsellor in school who further supported her by phoning EPIC on her behalf. The young person who found out about EPIC from her friend in care then asked her social worker to make contact with EPIC for her. This highlights that for some young people it's not necessarily a case of just having the information, sometimes a proactive approach is needed on the young person's behalf to actually get in touch.

The issue of advocacy needing to be more widely known and available arose within other groups participating in the study. In the advocate group, there was a concern that many children and young people were not aware of advocacy or knew how to access the service with particular reference to those in foster care and those in rural areas. Within the stakeholder cohort, one senior Tusla manager felt that young people should be informed about EPIC at the beginning of their care experience and it should be ensured that they know their rights from the outset. This manager expressed the view that a right to access advocacy should be enshrined in Irish legislation which would be congruent with pursuing a rights-based approach to children and young people in care. Another senior Tusla manager, whilst not concurring with the need for advocacy legislation, spoke about the importance of having a communication strategy so that all young people in care / with care experience would a) know about the services available, b) know how to make contact and c) know how to avail of particular services they need in a manner that they want to engage, with a view to maximising availability of services within the resources available.

Interestingly in the stakeholder cohort, the organisation providing advocacy in a different sector, is mandated by legislation to do so. Their perspective on this was mixed. On the positive side it guaranteed them funding on an ongoing basis but on the other hand the resources they had to deliver a service with an ever-increasing demand had remained static. In addition to this they felt that some

of their work was hindered from responding to contemporary needs by virtue of their remit being enshrined in legislation that was almost two decades old.

How could advocacy be promoted?

As we have seen, there was a multitude of ways in which the young adults interviewed accessed EPIC's advocacy service, noting that each of these individuals were informed about the service through a person they had a relationship with, either professionally or personally.

The young adults had lots of ideas in relation to how advocacy in EPIC could be promoted among their peers. This ranged from leaflets being given to every young person in residential care, posters in every Tusla waiting room, an online presence that aims to engage and interact with young people, advertising generally, professionals engaged with young people in care (e.g. social workers, aftercare workers) routinely promoting and informing them of EPIC advocacy services, and EPIC doing workshops with other youth engaged organisations such as those working in mental health, school guidance and youth work. One young adult points out:

> "You'll always be waiting around for your social worker for a few minutes in the waiting room so I think the basics is that there should be a big, large A3 or double A3 poster with EPIC and independent advocacy in every waiting room in Tusla. I think that should be a basic."

Another says:

> "I suppose if, like the social workers and after care workers promoted it, so everyone knew about EPIC."

In relation to advertising, one young woman makes a comparison:

> "Say with like other health services like Pieta House and all, they're very big on their advertisement and like everyone knows what Pieta House is!"

The online space was also seen as very important:

> "Well, social media is a big thing. I know they have a social media page but like they need to do more to reach their target audience which would be like people in care and like nowadays like people my age, like social media is kind of the big thing. That's where they're going to reach people. … you know, do lived experience pieces and get some people on to talk on their social media and how they've used their service or, you know, do surveys online that would, like, engage people."

This young woman specifically highlights Instagram and TikTok as being key platforms for young people.

> "Instagram and TikTok. Yeah, for sure. …I know that's the big thing now, like most people will do TikTok and whatever, it is those short videos and stuff."

One of the Tusla senior managers communicated that they thought there was significant potential to develop awareness and engagement with EPIC using online means, not only because this was the sphere that young people inhabit but also in terms of reaching over 6000 young people across 26 counties:

> "We need to look at how we also do things differently because it's a new generation in terms of online and online media and how they want to engage. People like that online space, they like that. Of course they love face to face as well. We want to maximise our reach to those 6000 people across 26 counties."

Bendo, in her research (2020) discusses the potential of online means to increase the accessibility of advocacy, in addition to ensuring the physical accessibility and ease of contact for those wanting to engage with advocacy.

Needs of particular groups of young people

Another theme that arose within the data was the needs of particular groups of young people. These included those with disabilities, young care-experienced parents, migrant young people and those experiencing mental health difficulties. This concern was raised by three of the young adults (27%), 40% of the advocates and two thirds of management respondents who referred to the increasing complexity and challenging circumstances of care-experienced young people.

One young adult felt she was lucky because she has the support of an advocate but was concerned for others:

> "For all spectrums of life, I think it (advocacy) should be for that, like even especially for the disabilities and disorders and all … it doesn't matter. For someone who has schizophrenia or ADHD, or for mothers with babies. Or for a young man that can't because of the stigma around it not being able to voice the pain and suffering that they're going through. Or for autism, any spectrum of autism.
>
> To voice, do you know what I mean? I can voice my feelings, my emotions, you know, so it's kind of sad for people."

Another articulates the challenges experienced by some that are not adequately recognised or addressed:

> "I feel like mental health and disability are also a really, really big part of it. Like a lot of people go under the radar and things like that, so I don't necessarily know if it would be to have more access to organisations like EPIC or to have more training for EPIC workers to like either recognise it or I don't know. But I definitely feel that like a lot of kids and young people are let down in that sense where it's like, 'well, you know, you have a placement now, so there's a roof over your head. And I hope you're all fine'. But a lot of them are coming from places with trauma and then getting more trauma, being in care. So, I think it would be good if people had the opportunity to like help those needs before they get worse."

Advocacy team respondents expressed particular concern for care-experienced young people with disabilities, decrying the lack of available services for this cohort but also expressing the need for a dedicated and specialist advocacy response for this group. Those facing the process of leaving care who also have a disability were also a cohort highlighted by the stakeholder group which was an advocacy group for adults in the disability sector. These participants spoke about how often these young people fall between stools of service provision and are left at a considerable disadvantage because of this.

Wood's research (2017) highlights the increasing complexity of needs in advocacy and emphasises the importance of advocates being well trained to support children with regard to a wide range of concerns. He also discusses the development of specialist advocates to support particular cohorts of children and young people. Boylan and Ing's study (2005) calls for advocacy provision specifically for those with disabilities and ethnic backgrounds and suggests that advocates with specialist in-depth knowledge and skills can best serve the young people they work with. Concern for those with disabilities is echoed in the recent Child Law Project report which highlights the importance of independent advocacy specifically for parents with cognitive difficulties engaged with the child protection services, some of whom are still in the care system themselves (Corbett and Coulter, 2024).

Challenges posed by lack of resources and scarcity of support services

Related to the issue of increasing complexity of needs and challenges faced by care-experienced young people is the lack of resources and appropriate support services available to address those needs. This was a very strong theme in the advocates' survey data with 100% citing the lack of resources in terms of the care system and support services for children and young people as being the primary challenge impacting their work. Specifically, they raised the lack of suitable placements, lack of continuity in

social work and scarcity of available support services for young people in the spheres of mental health, disability, housing, and education as being the greatest difficulties encountered in advocacy work. One advocate states that the main challenge is:

> "The system itself and the challenges it faces at the moment, access to services for young people, constant changes in personnel in Tusla and other agencies. The lack of placements (onward and initial placements)."

According to another:

> "The current lack and retention of social workers, foster carers and residential placements leave the system very difficult to work in. …unfortunately now, there are many placement breakdowns. Also, the lack of mental health services for young people in care is beyond crisis at this stage."

The lack of resources and services needed by young people in care was also highlighted as a significant challenge for both equivalent services providing advocacy for care-experienced young people. Under-resourcing of regional Trusts (in UK jurisdictions), lack of and high turnover of social work staff and difficulty in young people accessing suitable services were highlighted. One group made the point that advocacy can be successful at one level, in getting the young person's voice heard, but because resources are lacking the action that can be taken is limited.

Ongoing crises in child and adolescent mental health services, disability assessments and supports and severe lack of suitable, affordable accommodation in Ireland are well documented (see Cooper, 2023; Griffin, 2024; Mental Health Reform, 2024; Social Justice Ireland, 2024). These issues, impacting the population at large, are even more detrimental for those who are or have been in state care due to the additional challenges these young people have encountered in their lives. Another layer of acute challenge for children and young people in care is a shortage of placements that are appropriate to their needs. One young adult, interviewed for this research, told of how she was placed in care on the other side of the country, six hours drive from where she was from. For her, advocacy was invaluable:

> "I don't know how I would have survived without advocacy work. You know the way you can't change your social worker from where you're from. …mine was six hours away, I wasn't able to see her as much and all of that. So having (my advocate) was so amazing, it's like closer support and access (to her) was so much easier."

These challenges, external to independent advocacy are acknowledged by a government report addressing the issues relating to children in care and young adults leaving care in which they specifically

reference lack of or delays in therapeutic and disability services and consequent escalation of problems (Government of Ireland, 2023).

Relationships between services and within professional networks

In addition to the challenges posed by resource issues in social work and other support services for young people, another theme emerged in the data which relates closely to this. That is the significance of interprofessional relationships between services, including advocacy, in supporting and responding to the needs of children and young people. Sometimes these relationships can be challenging and the importance of developing positive and clear understandings of advocacy was expressed by all three advocacy organisations (including EPIC) providing independent advocacy for care-experienced people. There was a feeling that sometimes there are misunderstandings of what advocacy is and that it can be seen as an inspection or complaints organisation rather than a service that facilitates young people to voice their views and wishes and input meaningfully in relation to decisions around their care. Developing positive relationships, clear understandings and collaborative approaches was seen by respondents as central to best advancing the situations of young people. One person noted 'the importance of ongoing communication and relationship building with statutory services and decision makers in this process' and another felt a partnership approach between organisations was vital. The view was expressed that when there were strong, collaborative relationships across organisations, this was when advocacy works best.

How agencies relate to each other was raised by both senior Tusla managers who felt that there are strong and constructive relationships between Tusla and EPIC. In terms of how EPIC is viewed by Tusla management one respondent states:

> "There's a real sense of trust and credibility within the organisation, a real belief in what they (EPIC) are doing and how they're doing it. And I think that the strength of that relationship is, you know, to be able to work absolutely collaboratively and to be able to have a collaborative relationship and a trusting relationship. And yet, you know, acknowledging and respecting the separation of our roles and our agencies. …. And that's not to say, obviously you know, they produce their reports. They have to be critical of Tusla or other state agencies when that's what they see. But what I think we have shared is that sense of 'we all have an ambition to make things better' and that we're able to talk to them about how we're trying to do that."

Bendo (2020) sees strong interprofessional relationships as being at the centre of good advocacy. Boylan and Ing (2005) assert that the relationships with advocates and social workers are particularly

key and, when done well, can make a very positive difference to improving the situations of their service users. These relationships don't just happen by default though, they need to be proactively developed between individuals and agencies on an ongoing basis, both at local and regional levels. This can happen both informally between colleagues and more formally between agencies. McColgan (2017) suggests practitioners from differing agencies participate in joint events aimed at dispelling myths and challenging misconceptions of each other's roles. This will contribute towards developing awareness of professional roles, values and modes of working. Effective professional communication promotes understanding and collegiality while at the same time respecting differing roles and being able to have honest, constructive conversations when perspectives differ.

Advocacy at a broader structural level around societal issues impacting young people

Our earlier discussion in relation to the lack of resources and services available to meet the needs of young people leads to another significant theme of the research which is the role of advocacy in highlighting and lobbying at broader local and national levels in respect of issues affecting care-experienced young people. This topic was reflected in many levels of the research data including young adults (45% spoke about this), advocates (expressed by 50%), EPIC management (referred to by 100%) and stakeholder groups (both equivalent advocacy services and Tusla management).

The young adults were mainly concerned with the issue of housing and the uncertainty and insecurity they experience when they can't find suitable accommodation. One young person had been in education but had to leave because she became unwell. When she was discharged from hospital, she found herself in homeless services and had lost her aftercare supports as she was not in education anymore:

> "But then when I left education, when I actually became unwell and when I was in hospital, then I came out of hospital, I went to a B & B, like I just don't think that it should be like that for other kids because for me like it shocked me like a lot… it's like they just threw me out and they're like, yeah, now you do it yourself."

She continues:

> "I don't know, like if EPIC has that like in their hands, like if they can even do something about that or if it's like Tusla, … I don't know the ins and outs of it. But do something better for young people. I just wish that they could like link together and come up with accommodation and help young people more with moving on and having accommodation there available for young care leavers that have left care because obviously homeless services is not ideal for

> people who've been in care and stuff like that. Like I've been in homeless services the last past two years and it's just not ideal, like it's mentally draining being in a place like this. I just wish that like Tusla had like something in place for care leavers and stuff."

Another young person feels that EPIC should be involved in lobbying the government in a more visible way:

> "So for example, like I don't see a lot of national advocacy coming from the organisation (EPIC), which is a little bit disappointing as they do have a youth advisory panel. So like what you'd see in a lot of other organisations that they'll actually be a lot more about the national advocacy in terms of policy. …They need to put *some* pressure on the government, like especially around that accommodation piece. … I'm not saying that they aren't working behind the scenes. I'm sure they are like obviously, I'm sure that they were a large part of the reason that has come through in the first place, but I think they need to demonstrate their advocacy. I think they need to be more outspoken on that."

Advocates and management pointed to how EPIC has been active in lobbying government and related agencies in relation to issues that affect children and young people they work with. This is in the form of pre-budget submissions, involvement in government committee consultations, raising issues directly with Tusla regarding policy change, and presenting at fora relating to children and young people in care - such as the DCEDIY, Judiciary, OCO, Children's Rights Alliance, and Youth Justice. However, it was also expressed among this cohort a wish to further develop this dimension of the service, one respondent (from the management group) highlighting the need to:

> "see the value of the service beyond fixing immediate issues and recognise that it has a role to play in addressing systemic and structural issues that negatively impact on children in care, and young people leaving care."

This theme also arose in the stakeholder groups with both equivalent advocacy organisations for care-experienced people highlighting that they saw a role and were active at the level of lobbying in relation to wider issues impacting their service users. Both senior Tusla managers referred to this dimension of EPIC's work and viewed it in a positive light expressing the constructive contribution it makes at policy levels. One senior manager highlighted the importance and potential of advocating for those in particular who:

> "have complexity of need, where they're just not able to access the state services they require, like mental health, like disability, like addiction or housing and I think it's that space,

> because I think it's addressing the strategic issues, advocating at government level. You know, that stretching of advocacy into that influencing space."

Another senior Tusla manager spoke about accommodation:

> "There is a voice (EPIC's) to be heard there. I think that's really important. They can call out and acknowledge the progress that's made and a common call for, you know, increasing resources in the environment.
>
> You know, it's like the discussion about having a right to a home. Well, I mean, a child in care who's going into aftercare should definitely have a right to a home. …Whereas we can't provide the child with parents, but we could provide them a home. … So you know, I think that rights based approach is really important. I definitely support that and advocate for it in in the department. … Is it the right thing to do? Yes, it definitely is."

An advocacy service working on the frontline with children and young people is well placed to identify and formulate a picture of the significant issues facing care-experienced people in their daily lives. It is a space where young people are not only supported and facilitated in advancing their immediate concerns relating to their care but also to contribute to a collective articulation of broader policy and societal issues impacting them. A recent review of research relating to care-experienced youth in Ireland highlighted the lack of children's voice in research despite widespread recognition of its importance (Government of Ireland 2023). The process of independent advocacy provides 'early intelligence of systemic issues' (Department for Education, 2023: 7) and opportunities for these to be fed into mechanisms for advocacy at regional, policy and governmental levels. In support of this Bendo states, 'as a best practice, advocacy is most effective when offices learn from the perspectives of young people who act as meaning-makers in their own lives and have lived experiences that can help to combat social justice issues' (2020: 20). However Bendo also acknowledges, 'One of the barriers to executing systemic advocacy is the amount of time it takes to see concrete changes at the systemic and policy level' (2020:130). Nevertheless, she argues it is important work as it can benefit large groups of young people who face similar issues. The importance of this work is supported by Corbett and Coulter's analysis of the challenges facing children and families in the child protection system in Ireland as they conclude: 'The issues identified are systemic and require urgent, coordinated action across Government' (2024: 89).

More opportunities to meet others with care experience

A number of young adults (n=3) communicated that it would be beneficial if there were more opportunities for care-experienced young people to meet together. In relation to this, one person says:

> "I'd love to be able to meet other people that are in my situation. Like if there was a day where they could bring the young people together and like we could all like talk amongst each other and stuff like that. Like I wish that they had days where, like events where young people like care leavers can go to and just so you feel like you're not the only one because like when you're in a situation you're just like "Oh my God, like I feel like I'm the only one in this situation".
>
> I know deep down that there is other people in my shoes as well. I'd just love if other young people, like we're able to all meet each other."

Another expressed that to meet others would be an effective way of facilitating collective advocacy around issues affecting those with care experience and another young adult referred to the possibility of peer education around issues like drugs and sex education. This young person felt it would be beneficial and impactful to hear from other care-experienced young people:

> "Even in relation to drugs and sex awareness, I feel like it's still taboo. But like, it's a reality that is happening …Like, I don't think it should get to the stage where someone is pregnant or gets someone pregnant. A lot of people in care or coming out of care, are already, like, somewhat disadvantaged youths and are more susceptible and likely to get into those type of situations. I don't necessarily think a class would be good, but even maybe some sort of workshop or some sort of things with other young people to even talk like, or even if it's a past care kid that talks about their experiences or stuff like that. I know young people will probably appreciate more anecdotal things than like professionals being like, 'don't do drugs'."

The issue of bringing young people together also arose in the advocate's survey with 30% articulating that it would be beneficial to develop more peer advocacy among care-experienced people with one respondent suggesting a big brother/big sister programme where care-experienced adults can support children and young people currently in care.

According to Lansdown, peer support and education is a key way for young people to exercise participation in services for those with care experience (cited in Bendo, 2020: 253). Reed (2022) also highlights the value of linking in with other care-experienced young people in her discussion of

advocacy, citing involvement in events such as conferences and peer fora as being especially beneficial. This is echoed by young people in the Tusla Advisory Group who called for the setting up of groups for people in aftercare in the context of articulating a strong need for more support for this cohort (TAG, 2021). The young people in Boylan and Ing's (2005) research valued the opportunity to meet together and engage in group advocacy as it gave them confidence to stand up regarding issues they felt strongly about.

What about rights?

This report began with a discussion on the centrality of children's rights in terms of a key rationale for the provision of advocacy services for care-experienced children and young people. Article 12 of the UNCRC provides a legislative foundation for the provision of a service where children and young people are facilitated to express their views and influence the decisions made in relation to their care. These rights of participation are followed through in Irish legislation and policy. Where has this theme of rights materialised in the research data?

Curiously the issue of rights did not arise overtly in the interviews with the young adults. The young people did not articulate their experiences of advocacy, what they valued and deemed as most important in terms that referenced rights. Rather the headline aspects of advocacy for them were support, relationship, having someone who was there just for them, the expertise of the advocate and practical support and help around care issues. These dimensions, it could be argued, are the outworkings of practice which is informed by children's rights that supports and enables them to participate and have increased agency in their lives.

The advocate survey data reflected a strong commitment to the principle of rights with 80% referring to how advocacy was grounded in young people's rights, specifically article 12 of the UNCRC. They also spoke about the importance of young people knowing and being aware of their rights. The theme of rights was also prominent in the management survey data with two thirds of respondents referring to the centrality of a rights-based approach to advocacy which provides a clear focus to advocacy work with young people as well as providing the rationale to challenge inequalities at a structural level. There was some concern expressed in the management data that a rights-based practice should not drift into support as this was outside the remit of advocacy.

Among the stakeholders' cohort the theme of rights featured strongly with all three advocacy organisations identifying rights as a key principle informing their practice. One organisation providing equivalent services to care-experienced people put a lot of emphasis on producing documentation

(both hard copy and online) on the rights of children and young people particularly as they pertain to those in care. This information was not only for young people themselves but also for professionals such as social workers, residential care staff and foster carers. In the Tusla stakeholder cohort, one senior manager had a very clear focus on the importance of a rights-based approach to practice with young people in care and the contribution of advocacy to this was central in their view:

> "The fact that there is independent advocacy complements and empowers and enables young people to really have their rights met and I think that's really important. I think the rights piece of the advocacy service is so important if we're aiming to have a rights-based system at some level. …The access to legal advice, if it's needed, is very important, but also the continual attendance of advocates at meetings representing young people and empowering them to represent themselves is really important."

Having the theme of rights reflected more strongly at worker and management levels rather than in the feedback of young people is not a phenomenon unique to this research. Many studies conducted in the area of independent advocacy for children and young people in care reveal similar findings and also highlight the importance of a supportive, trusting relationship to young care-experienced research participants (Barnes, 2012; Quinn *et al.*, 2017; Boylan and Ing, 2005; Barnes, 2007). Valued most by the young people in Boylan and Ing's (2005) study was a caring and enduring relationship with their advocates. That study concluded that a strong relationship underpinned effective and meaningful participation, and therefore was a precursor to realising young people's rights. Barnes in her 2012 study concludes that a more caring model of advocacy is most beneficial and feels that practice needs to be rebalanced in favour of care. She states:

> Considering an ethic of care alongside rights could help rights workers to build on the care ethic they already demonstrate in their individual relationships with young people, continuing to focus on the process of their work and treating young people with respect and equality. Focus on a care ethic might also encourage rights workers to reconsider their current models of advocacy. I would suggest that they need to question whether principles of rights are always operable and whether they do also need to take into account young people's networks of relationships and the context of their care in the work (Barnes, 2012: 1289)

A contributing factor to this conclusion is the fact that some young people in Barnes' study, felt that pursuing their rights with professionals actually made things difficult and awkward for them at times leaving them reluctant to take this approach. Quinn *et al.*, (2017) recognise the importance of rights but also the need for continuing care and support for young people. Quinn *et al.* ask an important

question - how can this emotional and relational support approach be realised within a rights-based framework? They suggest that a rights-based discourse is most impactful at policy, service and system change levels and emphasise that an approach which prioritises emotional supports and relationship with a supportive adult is key to working with young people.

Considering these issues and the findings of both this research study and the studies outlined above it seems clear that in order for practice to be effective and meaningful in rights-based advocacy, relationship must come first. Relationship is the vehicle through which rights, participation, empowerment, and other dimensions of independent advocacy are realised.

empowering people in care

Towards a model of advocacy?

The findings of this research and other research carried out in similar spheres point strongly to a model of advocacy that acknowledges the centrality of a supportive relationship between the advocate and young person in the advocacy process. Other key dimensions of advocacy include its independence, being grounded in rights and facilitating the empowerment, participation and the voice of the child/young person.

This report recommends a model of advocacy that has relationship at its heart, is informed by rights and maintains a focus on progressing issues of importance to children and young people in care and with care experience. In a nutshell the model can be summarised as: **relationship-based independent advocacy rooted in rights and facilitating voice, participation and empowerment.**

Relationship first

The model being proposed in this report has relationship at its core and draws from relationship-based or relationship-centred practice. This approach has been developed in recent years in the contexts of social care, social work, youth work and advocacy and has grown out of awareness and experience of practice that has increasingly become bureaucratised and outcomes-focused to the detriment of relational, person-centred practice (Ruch, 2018; McColgan and McMullin, 2017).

Why prioritise relationship?

It's what young people are telling us: There is a strong rationale for prioritising the relationship within advocacy, not least because it's what young people value as a priority and experience as most beneficial within the process. McColgan and McMullin remind us that 'Service users'…perspectives on the services they receive should be considered fundamental to service delivery' (2017: 25) therefore it is vital to take cognisance of the views of care-experienced children and young people in this regard.

Difficult experiences of relationships: In addition to this, children and young people in care will, by virtue of their life circumstances, have experienced relationships that are fractured, chaotic, disrupted and sometimes violent and abusive. The resultant trauma for those who are care experienced will significantly impact their approach to future relationships often leaving them with a much steeper mountain to climb when it comes to building stable, constructive relationships of trust and respect (Ruch, 2018). This makes it all the more significant for care-experienced young people to experience positive relationships and to have the opportunity to develop these with professionals and reliable adults (Winter, 2015).

Experiencing a positive relationship is transformative in its own right: According to Ruch (2018), the development of a strong relationship with a professional not only provides a vehicle for effective practice, it also constitutes an intrinsic dimension of intervention. Being in a reliable, supportive and honest relationship can bring about change in its own right. Positive human relationships help us navigate difficult circumstances and can enable us to build capacity to manage life and the challenges encountered. McMullin (2017) concurs with this and emphasises the important role professionals can have in modelling positive relationships with young people. This can be therapeutic and empowering for young people and can help equip them in terms of building confidence and engaging positively in developing relationships with other adults. Winter takes this further and believes that 'a key process in helping them (young people) come to terms with their experiences is the development and experience of trusting, stable and nurturing relationships' (2015), thus a positive relationship contributes to helping the young person process and reconstruct their understandings and experiences and bring this into building trusting connections with others. As well as increasing a young person's capacity to develop positive attachments with others, Winter asserts that the impact is also at an individual level. Experiencing stable, trusting relationships also helps care-experienced children and young people develop confidence and an increased capability for self-reliance (Winter, 2015), thus building their capacity to have agency in their own lives.

A strong relationship provides the foundation for the other key dimensions of advocacy: However the role of advocacy goes beyond providing the opportunity for young people to experience a positive trusting adult relationship and the benefits this brings. The advocacy relationship is a relationship with a particular purpose and focus. Having the relationship at the heart of practice provides an important foundation from which to build the other dimensions of advocacy such as voice, participation and empowerment. In order for a young person to voice what their issues and concerns are and be willing for an advocate to support them to progress these, they will need to have a sense of trust in the adult they are communicating this to. A strong relationship is a precursor to enabling meaningful participation and empowerment (McIlven *et al*. 2017) and according to Henry *et al*., provides the conditions for young people to 'own the outcome of their own destiny' (2010: 38). The likelihood of successful, lasting, intentional change, according to Todd, 'is promoted by the availability of a helping relationship' (2017: 98).

Relationship-based advocacy also fuels awareness around systemic issues which are impacting the person. This is a key dimension of Goodman *et al*.'s relationship-centered model of advocacy and they state, 'An empathic connection to another person appears to enhance the ability to understand the extent and nature of systemic oppression and its damaging effects' (2018: 145). Ultimately, Goodman

et al. claim that a strong authentic relationship acts 'as a springboard for developing shared goals, identifying a plan of action, and collaborating on systemic change' (2018: 124).

Several authors caution against practice that values action over relationship (Ruch, 2018; Goodman *et al*., 2018; Pascoe, 2024). It is vital that the relationship-building process is established in order for the work to be effective. This is articulated well by a participant in Pascoe's research who says, 'relationship is at the core of all of it otherwise you are just throwing things, you are using tools that without the relationship first, they just don't work' (2024: 12).

The nature of beneficial relationships with professionals

What kind of relationships are most beneficial to young people? What are the elements that are most significant? As we have seen throughout this report, young people benefit from supportive relationships characterised by warmth and trust, with adults who are reliable, available and who listen to them. This is reiterated by McMullin when she states, 'I think children and young people need warm and authentic adults who might not have all the answers or resources but essentially do care; this can only be achieved through relational work' (2017: 62). Pascoe reiterates the importance of demonstrating care in relationship-based practice and says this can be done through practical acts such as helping with a task or remembering a special occasion (2024). The theme of care and kindness comes through strongly both in research carried out with young people and with professionals. McMullin calls for the importance of this to be recognised at an organisational level: 'Acts of kindness enable relationship-building; therefore, they should become integrated and organisationally supported and accepted practice' (2017: 65). Within effective advocacy, a supportive relationship needs to be the foundation from which the person's views and wishes are identified and a collaborative plan of action worked out. This, according to Goodman *et al*., involves 'listening carefully, providing emotional support, and helping to identify and navigate relevant systems' (2018: 124) and results in pragmatic efforts to address tangible goals.

The role of supervision

Supporting young people in advocacy practice with relationship at its heart is emotional, and sometimes hard to define work. Many of the children and young people advocates work with are encountering significant difficulties, most often without ready-made solutions. As we have noted earlier in this report, advocates are practicing in the context of under-resourced and often crisis-driven services. Working supportively, with a focus on developing meaningful relationships and in ways that demonstrate concern and care necessitates reflection on boundaries in relation to the advocate's role. Reflection around practicing in a caring, engaged manner whilst ensuring the work is sustainable for

the worker and the organisation is key. It is also important in ensuring the work remains focused and is facilitating the voice, empowerment and participation of the young person. A prominent theme in discussions of relationship-based practice is the importance of support and good supervision for practitioners. According to Goodman *et al*. (2018), regular supervision is essential in this type of advocacy as it can generate intense feelings, especially as we enter the distressing and challenging world of another. McMullin supports this view highlighting the secondary trauma that can occur when workers are supporting young people who have experienced significant traumas in their lives (2017). The work can be complex and dynamic so good supervision is vital in order to process the impact and ensure the work stays on task (Ruch, 2018).

Relationship-based independent advocacy rooted in rights and facilitating voice, participation and empowerment

The model proposed in this report is relationship-based independent advocacy rooted in rights and facilitating voice, participation and empowerment. This captures the key elements of advocacy that emerged in the research findings, supported by relevant literature and research in this sector. A visual representation of this is:

- A tree with green leaves and brown branches and roots. The tree has words written on it:
    - Roots = 'Rights'
    - Trunk = 'Supportive Relationship'
    - Branches = Voice, Participation, Empowerment.
- At the top left corner, there is a blue bird with the words 'Systemic change' next to it.

As discussed earlier in this report, children's rights provide the rationale and foundation for independent advocacy with children and young people in care. These rights are enshrined in the UNCRC and reinforced in Irish legislation and policy. We have seen in this research and related studies that rights emerge more strongly as themes at management and policy level discourse around advocacy. Whilst realising the rights of children and young people is woven into the fabric of advocacy practice, rights are not overtly visible at the level of young people in terms of their priorities. In this model, rights provide a fundamental bedrock securing and nourishing the roots of advocacy practice.

The trunk of the tree, the centrepiece, represents the supportive relationship between the young person and advocate which provides the core of advocacy practice and enables the branches of voice, participation and empowerment. Relationship-based practice as it applies to advocacy has been discussed in detail above. In this model, a strong trunk or relationship, makes the other dimensions of independent advocacy possible and optimises their effectiveness. Overall the advocacy process would

feed into raising awareness around wider structural issues pertaining to care-experienced children and young people with a view to advocating in relation to these at broader systemic levels.

How does this model relate to current EPIC advocacy?

It is apparent from the findings of this research that young people's experiences of EPIC advocacy are very positive and that they are valuing highly the significant support they receive from advocates. They are appreciative of the nature of the relationships they have with advocates and value their expertise and input around care-related issues. The advocates too focus on relationship as a key dimension for their practice whilst also being mindful of the importance of empowering young people and seeing them have an input into the issues they are encountering. Management's focus is less around the relationship dimension of advocacy, focussing more on rights, empowerment and addressing issues at policy and structural levels. They express a wish to establish clarity with regards to a clear, well-defined model of advocacy. It is hoped that this research, its reported findings, review of relevant research and literature and its conclusions regarding a proposed model of advocacy would provide a framework for the organisation to process perspectives, review what changes are needed, consider the positionality of the elements and principles informing advocacy and develop a clear focused model of practice.

Further recommendations

A number of themes arose in the research findings that lead to some further recommendations in respect of the Advocacy Service in EPIC.

Promotion of EPIC advocacy

The vast majority of young adults interviewed communicated that not enough care-experienced young people know about EPIC or its Advocacy Service and that it needs much more visibility among this group. This was the view of some advocates too. Potential promotion methods suggested by research participants are highlighted in the findings section of this report. This report recommends that EPIC reviews and strengthens its promotion strategy with a view to all young people in care being aware of their services and having the opportunity to avail of these.

Develop a response for particular groups of young people

Young adults expressed concern for groups of care-experienced young people experiencing additional challenges such as a disability, mental health difficulties, young parenthood or being an unaccompanied minor. This issue arose among the advocate cohort also. This report recommends that EPIC review its strategies aimed at responding to the particular needs of these groups. In addition to

continuing to ensure that advocates are well trained to support children with regard to a wide range of concerns, EPIC should consider developing specialist expertise in the areas identified and how it can influence broader external service responses to the specific and complex needs of these cohorts.

Building interagency understanding and relationships

Research examined in the literature review demonstrates that the interests of care-experienced young people are better served when the agencies and practitioners involved in their lives have strong relationships and clear comprehension in relation to each other's roles. Some participants in this research expressed a wish for there to be a clearer understanding of EPIC's Advocacy Service among related services and practitioners. This report recommends that EPIC further develop and implement a strategy aimed at enhancing interagency awareness and developing collaborative relationships with related professionals and agencies whilst maintaining clarity around their independence as advocates on behalf of the child or young person they are working with.

Review systemic advocacy mechanisms

The theme of systemic advocacy arose in all cohorts interviewed for this research. The findings communicate a strong desire to see greater impact and focus on advocacy at a broader societal level on issues affecting care-experienced young people. Accommodation was particularly highlighted as a concern. This report recommends EPIC evaluate ways that it could further develop this dimension of its service in order to optimise impact in this sphere.

Perceptions around EPIC's independence from Tusla

Whilst management in EPIC and Tusla expressed clarity in relation to the independence of EPIC and the value of this in terms of articulating and providing challenge regarding issues impacting young people, views were expressed by some advocates and one young adult that indicate that the perception of EPIC's independence from its primary funder is less apparent. This report recommends that this issue is considered with a view to rectifying perceptions and demonstrating independence.

EPIC's campaign for advocacy to be enshrined in legislation

This report acknowledges the significant advantages of independent advocacy for care-experienced children and young people being enshrined in Irish legislation as it would entitle these young people to an important and vital service. However, this report recommends careful consideration regarding the formulation of such legislation in order to allow for independent advocacy to develop effectively as a service into the future, empowered to respond to the ever-unfolding complexities of need emerging in this sector and in society at large.

Promotion of opportunities for young people to meet together

Some young adults expressed a wish to attend events with other care-experienced young people albeit with varying focuses. This report recommends EPIC considers current opportunities provided for young people to meet together with a view to optimising awareness, opportunity and interest among care-experienced young people.

Conclusion

This study has provided an in-depth exploration of EPIC's Advocacy Service from the perspectives of young adult service users, advocates, EPIC management and a number of stakeholder organisations. Independent advocacy was also investigated drawing on findings from relevant literature and research in this field. In view of the research data and best practice indicated in the research literature, the report makes a number of key recommendations and proposes a model of relationship-based independent advocacy rooted in rights and facilitating voice, participation and empowerment. This model was explored with a particular focus on how relationship-based practice relates to independent advocacy and is a crucial component in advancing optimal practice in this field, leading to effectively promoting young people's voice, facilitating their participation and empowering them to realise a sense of increased agency in their own lives. The model also acknowledges the role that independent advocacy plays in highlighting and lobbying in relation to systemic issues impacting care-experienced young people.

empowering people in care

Bibliography

Barnes, V. (2007) 'The Case for caring advocacy', *Child Abuse Review* Vol. 16(3), pp. 140–152.

Barnes, V. (2012) 'Social Work and Advocacy with Young People: Rights and Care in Practice', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 42(7), pp. 1275–1292. Available at https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr142

Bendo, D. (2020) *An Analysis of Child and Youth Advocacy in 21st Century Contemporary Contexts*. PhD thesis: Available at https://www.academia.edu/83407237/An_Analysis_of_Child_and_Youth_Advocacy_in_21st_Century_Contemporary_Contexts?email_work_card=title

Boylan, J. and Ing, P. (2005) ''Seen but not heard'– young people's experience of advocacy', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 14(1), pp. 2-12. Available at https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2005.00334.x

Cascardi, M., Brown, C., Shpiegel, S., and Alvarez, A. (2015) 'Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going? A Conceptual Framework for Child Advocacy', *SAGE Open*, 5(1), pp1-10. Available at https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015576763

Chase, E. and Kemmis, J. (2006) 'Advocacy for young people in care evaluated', *Community Care*, Dec 2006. Available at https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2006/12/06/advocacy-for-young-people-in-care-evaluated/

Cooper, I. (2023) 'Ireland relies heavily on the community and voluntary sector - it is at breaking point', *The Journal*. Available at https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/charity-funding-cuts-6169752-Sep2023/

Coram Voice and National Youth Advocacy Service (2022) *Children and young people's views on England's care review Advocacy, Independent Visitors and Protected Characteristics,* November 2022. England: Coram Voice and NYAS.

Corbett, M. and Coulter, C. (2024) *Falling Through the Cracks, An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024*, Dublin: Child Law Project.

Dalrymple J. (1997) 'Advocacy', in Garratt, D., Roche, J. and Tucker, S. (eds) *Changing Experiences of Youth*. London: Sage in association with the Open University, U.K.

Dalrymple, J. and Boylan, J. (2013) *Effective Advocacy in Social Work*. London: Sage Publications.

Daly, F. and Gilligan, R. (2005) *Lives in Foster Care: The Educational and Social Support Experiences of Young People aged 13 to 14 years in Long-term Foster Care*. Dublin: Children's Research Centre.

Daly, F. (2012) *'MY VOICE HAS TO BE HEARD', Research on outcomes for young people leaving care in North Dublin*, Dublin: EPIC

Daly, F. (2012) 'What do young people need when they leave care? Views of care leavers and aftercare workers in North Dublin', *Child Care in Practice*, 18(4), 309-324.

Department for Education (2023) *National Standards for the Provision of Children and Young People's Advocacy Services* (ENGLAND). Available at https://consult.education.gov.uk/children-in-need/f-revisions-to-the-national-standards-and-statutor/supporting_documents/Revised%20National%20Standards%20for%20the%20Provision%20of%20Children%20and%20Young%20Peoples%20Advocacy%20Services.pdf

Department for Education (2022) *Independent review of children's social care: final report.* England. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report

EPIC (Empowering People in Care) (2024) *National Advocacy Service Report 2023*. Dublin: EPIC

Gilligan, R., Brady, E., and Cullen, L. (2022) *One More Adversity: The lived experience of care leavers in Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic*. Dublin: School of Social Work & Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Goodman, L., Wilson, J., Helms, J., Greenstein, N. and Medzhitova, J. (2018) 'Becoming an Advocate: Processes and Outcomes of a Relationship-Centered Advocacy Training Model', *The Counseling Psychologist,* 46(2) 122 –153.

Government of Ireland (2023) *Children in Care and Young Adults Leaving Care: a literature review of Irish research*. Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Available at https://assets.gov.ie/251292/edb6d3cf-9abf-4808-97fd-5df9d307f0e5.pdf

Griffin, N. (2024) 'Children's disability services register shows 'risk of harm' due to staff shortages', Irish Examiner. Available at https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41482432.html

Health Information and Quality Authority (2023) *The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care.* Dublin: Health Information and Quality Authority. Available at

https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2023-03/The-Fundamentals-of-Advocacy-in-Health-and-Social-Care.pdf

Henry, P., Morgan, S. and Hammond, M. (2010) Building Relationships through Effective Interpersonal Engagement: A Training Model for Youth Workers, *Youth Studies Ireland*, 5(2) Autumn/Winter, pp. 25-38.

Jones, R. (2023) *The Northern Ireland review of children's social care services report*. Available at https://www.cscsreviewni.net/files/cscsreviewni/2023-06/The%20NI%20Review%20of%20Children%27s%20Social%20Care%20Services.pdf

McColgan, M. and McMullin, C. (eds.) (2017) *Doing Relationship-based social work – a practical guide to building relationships and enabling change*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

McColgan, M. (2017) 'Developing and sustaining relationships in multidisciplinary working', in McColgan, M. and McMullin, C. (eds.) (2017) *Doing Relationship-based social work – a practical guide to building relationships and enabling change*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

McDowall, J.J. (2016) 'CREATE's Advocacy for Young People Transitioning from Care in Australia', in: Mendes, P., and Snow, P. (eds.) *Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

McIlven, U., Campell, G., Somerville, M. and Horgan, B. (2017) 'Building relationships to enable change – a journey with service users and carers', in McColgan, M. and McMullin, C. (eds.) *Doing Relationship-based social work – a practical guide to building relationships and enabling change*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

McMullin, C. (2017) 'Building relationships in social work – a 4 stage Relationship model', in McColgan, M. and McMullin, C. (eds.) *Doing Relationship-based social work – a practical guide to building relationships and enabling change*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Mental Health Reform (2024) 'Families for Reform of CAMHS report highlights the challenges impacting children with mental health needs'. Available at https://mentalhealthreform.ie/news/families-for-reform-of-camhs-report-highlights-the-challenges-impacting-children-with-mental-health-needs/

Morgan, G. (2017) *Independent Advocacy and Spiritual Care - Insights from Service Users, Advocates, Health Care Professionals and Chaplains*. London: Palgrave MacMillan

Palmer, A., Norris, M., and Kelleher, J. (2022). Accelerated adulthood, extended adolescence and the care cliff: Supporting care leavers' transition from care to independent living, *Child & Family Social Work*, 27(4), 748–759. Available at https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12922

Pascoe, K. M. (2024) 'Subverting, challenging and working within bureaucratic and managerialist systems: strategies for upholding relationship-based social work practice', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, pp. 1–17. Available at https://doi:10.1080/02650533.2024.2411044

Quinn, N., Davidson, J., Milligan, I., Elsley, S., and Cantwell, N. (2017) 'Moving Forward: Towards a rights-based paradigm for young people transitioning out of care', *International Social Work*, 60(1), 140-155. Available at https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872814547439

Reed, S. (2022) 'Advocates and independent visitors made me feel listened to – but too many children in care lack this', *Community Care*, December 1, 2022. Available at https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2022/12/01/advocates-and-independent-visitors-made-me-feel-listened-to-and-supported-when-in-care-but-too-many-children-go-without/

Ruch, G., Turney, D. and Ward, A. (eds.) (2018) *Relationship-based Social Work – Getting to the Heart of Practice*, (2nd Edition), London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ruch, G. (2018) 'The contemporary context of relationship-based practice', chapter in Ruch, G., Turney, D. and Ward, A. (eds) (2018) *Relationship-based Social Work – Getting to the Heart of Practice*. 2nd edn. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Social Justice Ireland (2024) 'Addressing Ireland's Housing Crisis: Urgent Policy Reforms Needed'. Available at https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/addressing-irelands-housing-crisis-urgent-policy-reforms-needed

Thomas, N., Crowley, A., Moxon, D., Ridley, J. Street, C., and Joshi, P. (2017) 'Independent Advocacy for Children and Young People: Developing an Outcomes Framework', *Children and Society*, 31(5), pp. 365–377. Available at https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12207

Tierney, E., D. Kennan, C. Forkan, B. Brady and R. Jackson (2018) *Tusla's Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support: Children's Participation Work Package Final Report*. UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway.

Todd, J. E. (2017) 'Relationship-based practice with older people', in McColgan, M. and McMullin, C. (eds) *Doing Relationship-based social work – a practical guide to building relationships and enabling change*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Tusla (2019) *Child and Youth Participation Strategy 2019-2023.* Dublin: Tusla, Child and Family Agency

Tusla (2024 (a)) *Tusla Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report August 2024*. Available at https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Monthly_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report_Aug_2024_V1.0.pdf

Tusla (2024 (b)) *Tusla Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report QUARTER 2 2024.* Available at https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q2_2024_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report.pdf

Tusla Advisory Group (TAG) (2021) *AFTERCARE SURVEY 2021 Report: Some Young People's Experience of the Transition from Care to Aftercare*. Dublin: Tusla. Available at https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/TAG_SURVEY_report.pdf

UN (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Available at: http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx

Winter, K. (2015) 'Supporting positive relationships for children and young people who have experience of care', *Insights: Evidence summaries to support social services in Scotland*. No. 28 Glasgow: Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services.

Wood, M. (2017) 'Independent advocacy services for looked-after children and young people: evidencing the impact', *Voluntary Sector Review*, 8(2), pp. 133-148. Available at https://doi.org/10.1332/204080517X14939730848304