Definition

Aftercare is a process of preparation and support for leaving care and moving to independent living for all those young people who are or have been in the care of the State. It is the provision of advice, guidance and assistance with regard to social and emotional support, accommodation and vocational support. It is a through-care process, in consultation with the young person, beginning from reception into care and includes comprehensive assessments, care plans and reviews.

In the absence of a supportive family network, those leaving care experience more acutely the transition to independent living. An effective aftercare policy strengthens the position of a young person leaving care, supports their transition to independent living and reduces the likelihood of homelessness, and social exclusion on leaving care.

According to the HSEs National Policy and Procedure Document for Leaving and Aftercare Services, all young people who have a care history with the HSE are entitled to an aftercare service. However, the extent of what is provided to the young person is based on assessment of need, age and the length of time the young person was in care. Furthermore, the policy states that in order for a young person to be entitled to aftercare they must be in care for a minimum period of twelve consecutive months prior to their 18th birthday.

Overview

Aftercare services in Ireland have developed in an inconsistent and ad hoc way which means the provision of leaving and aftercare services is highly variable. Receiving a service often depends on the location of the young person and the care provider in question; some young people receiving a range of supports when they leave care and other young people receive no services. However, it must be acknowledged that a new HSE Leaving and Aftercare Services National Policy and Procedures Document has been drawn up which should provide the basis for implementing an effective equitable service across the country. EPIC will continue to monitor the implementation of aftercare services around the country and is currently represented on the Irish Aftercare Forum, the Aftercare Steering Group of the HSE Dublin North East, the HSE Leaving and Aftercare Services Implementation Group, and the Care Leavers Ireland Charity.

Preparation for leaving care should begin a number of years before the young person leaves care. However, the reality on the ground is that there are still young people leaving care in an unplanned way, and some young people end up moving three or four times within the first two years of leaving.

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1 There is no standard definition of aftercare.
2 Youth Homelessness Strategy Monitoring Committee
4 May 2011.
5 EPIC have an Aftercare Network Support Co-ordinator http://www.epiconline.ie/meet-the-team-2.html#Brenda; learn more about EPIC work in this area: http://www.epiconline.ie/aftercare-advocacy--support-programme.html.
There is little current data available about the numbers leaving care each year and there is no information available on outcomes for young people after they leave the care system. However, under the Ryan Report Implementation Plan Action 65 requires the HSE to conduct a longitudinal study to follow young people who leave care for ten years, in order to map their transition into adulthood. The Second Progress report states that the HSE has engaged the services of NUIG to carry out a scoping process on this study and to advise on how best to progress this action.

The Child Care Act provides that the welfare of the child is the first and paramount consideration, having regard to the rights and duties of parents, the child’s wishes and the principle that children are generally better off when brought up in their own family. Section 45 of the Act details the responsibility of the State in terms of Aftercare provision. One of the main obstacles in this act is that it stipulates that the health board ‘may’ assist the young person for as long as the board is satisfied of his/her need for assistance. As a result, the provision of aftercare around the country is inconsistent and ad hoc and has been for many years. EPIC, along with other organisations, has been working to have aftercare put on a statutory footing for some time. It is common for those in the general population to often stay in the family home until they are around 25 years of age, compared to young people in the care system who leave at 18 years. Young people leaving care are less likely to have a ‘safety net’ of family and community supports than their peers in the general population. As a result, there is a responsibility on the state as the corporate parent to provide a range of practical supports to those leaving care, including: financial, accommodation, training and education, advice and information supports. Young people also need to have access to emotional support, mentoring, and a caring adult who will keep in touch with them.

Best practice supported by the National Standards in both Residential and Foster Care and the Child Care Regulations 1995, dictates that preparation for leaving care should be regarded as an integral part of the care placement and formal planning should begin from 16 years of age. The planning should be determined by a comprehensive needs assessment and should include targeted and structured support to enable the young person to make a smooth transition from care. This preparation, in conjunction with the young person, should inform the written aftercare plan, should follow on from the existing care plan and should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Preparations for leaving care should be taught in a realistic manner to prepare young people for living independently. Every young person in care needs to be supported and empowered to develop the necessary skills and resources to achieve independent living. Preparation and planning is essential to achieving positive outcomes, and young people must be engaged in the process. The

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6 This was documented by the Social Service Inspectorate Report 2001; p37; available at [http://lenus.ie/hse/bitstream/10147/44874/1/9165.pdf](http://lenus.ie/hse/bitstream/10147/44874/1/9165.pdf) but is still unfortunately often the case in 2011.

7 Please see our website for our submissions on aftercare, as well as press releases and work as part of Action for Aftercare.

8 Accommodation options for care leavers include: semi-independent accommodation (step down) / Supported Lodgings / Private rented / Shared housing (no direct staff – where YP have their own tenancy / Respite units (to accommodate YP who are experiencing a crisis)
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level of support required by each young person will vary, and the personal history of each young person needs to be taken into account. Young people should be assisted in their personal development work in relation to their sense of identity, building their self esteem and understanding their life as a young person with care experience.

EPIC has been working to have the Child Care Act 1991 amended to ensure that all children who require aftercare support receive it.

For EPIC’s submissions on the Child Care (Amendment) Bill please see our website www.epiconline.ie

Key Documents

- Child Care Act 1991 / Child Care (Amendment) Act 2011
- National Standards for Children’s Residential Centres (Department of Health and Children, 2001)
- National Standards for Foster Care
- Social Services Inspectorate Practice Guidelines on: Leaving Care and Aftercare Support
- HSE National Policy and Procedure Document on Leaving and Aftercare Services
- Youth Homelessness Strategy
- HIQA inspection reports: The Health Information and Quality Authority’s (HIQA) inspection reports have repeatedly found that insufficient or non-existent plans were in place to assist young people in their preparation for leaving care. Inspectors have called for the development of appropriate care planning within the statutory care planning process at least two years prior to a young person leaving care, in order to ensure required supports are in place.
- UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children
- UNCRC (articles 3, 9, 12, 20, 23, 34) – Committee Reports: The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that this State strengthen its efforts to provide follow up and aftercare to young person’s leaving care. The UN Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children explain the State’s obligations, and specifically state that:

11 Available at: http://www.dohc.ie/publications/national_standards_for_foster_care.html (02.08.11).
12 Available at: http://www.irishaftercare.com/docs/sc_guidance_leaving_aftercare.pdf (02.08.11).
13 New policy signed off in Q1 2011.
14 Available at: http://www.dohc.ie/publications/youth_homelessness_strategy.html (02.08.11).
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- The State should, throughout the period of a child’s care, aim at preparing the child to assume self reliance and to integrate fully in the community through the acquisition of social and life skills.
- The process of transition from care to aftercare should include counselling and support, and that young people leaving care should be encouraged to take part in planning for aftercare.
- Both the public and private sectors should be encouraged to employ children from care services.
- Special efforts should be made to ensure that a young person leaving care has a person who can help facilitate his/her independent living.
- Aftercare arrangements should be prepared as early as possible.
- Ongoing educational and vocational training opportunities should be part of the young person’s life skill education so as to help them to become financially independent.  

• **Recommendation 2005 (5) of the European Council Committee:** The Council of Europe made a recommendation to member states in March 2005 on the rights of children living in residential institutions, including the principle that children living in care should be entitled to appropriate aftercare support.  

• **Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 2009 / Ryan Implementation Plan:** This Report acknowledges that aftercare provision across the country is inconsistent and recommends that “aftercare services should be provided to give young adults a support structure they can rely on. In a similar way to families, childcare services should continue contact with young people after they have left care as minors”. The report states that the “provision of aftercare by the HSE should form an integral part of care delivery for children who have been in the care of the state....In particular, and in common with all young people, care leavers need the type of flexible support provided by families to young people exploring independence.” The Ryan Implementation Plan Progress Report addresses issues relating to aftercare in action points 64-67, 69 and 35. Though some progress has been made, including a new National Policy on Aftercare, progress on other issues are behind target including the need to map young people leaving care through a longitudinal study. Another key concern relating to aftercare within this Implementation Plan is young people who are placed in care but who are not legally in the care system and therefore have no right to aftercare (section 5’s).

**Difficulties**

- Research has shown that young people leaving care are significantly disadvantaged by comparison with their peers. They suffer from much greater social exclusion, poverty,

17 Recommendation 2005(5) of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on the rights of children living in residential institutions (16 March 2005); available at: https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/ViewDoc.jsp?id=835953&Site=CM (05.01.11).
homelessness, unemployment, and have higher mortality rates and incidence of mental health problems. They are more likely to become young parents and have less educational qualifications than their peers. They have an increased likelihood of abuse of alcohol and drugs, and this rises considerably for young people leaving special care or detention.

- Every young person needs an allocated social worker. Not every young person currently leaving care has an allocated social worker. This should be the minimum level of support provided for all children leaving care.

- No Legislative Right to Aftercare: In Ireland young people in care have no legislative right to receive continuing support after they reach the age of 18. The current legislative framework, the Child Care Act 1991 and the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2011, does not mandate aftercare assistance, it states: “where a child leaves the care of a health board, the board may . . . assist him for so long as the board is satisfied as to his need for assistance.” This can mean the young person must leave their home and move into supported accommodation or into independent living. As already stated, aftercare services in Ireland have developed in an inconsistent and ad hoc way which means the provision of leaving and aftercare services is highly variable. Receiving a service often depends on location and the individual care provider with some young people receiving a range of supports when they leave care and other young people receiving no services. Furthermore, there is no duty on the HSE to follow up with a young person who is not engaging with any service upon leaving care. There should be an obligation on the HSE to continue to try and engage with a young person at regular intervals for a number of years after they have left care.

- Many young people still leave care in an unplanned way, and some young people can expect to move three or four times within the first two years of leaving care.\(^\text{21}\)

- Data: There is limited information available on young people leaving the care system. Exact figures on the number of young people leaving care each year are not available, nor is information on the outcomes for such young people after their time in care. There is no research or tracking of young people after they have left the care system, however the HSE has engaged NUIG to carry out a scoping exercise for a longitudinal study to map young people leaving care over 10 years. This is much needed research and EPIC awaits developments eagerly.

- Outcomes indicators should be developed so that outcomes of those receiving an aftercare service can be compared with those who have received no supports and with those of other young people in the general population.

- The availability of aftercare workers is currently under-resourced despite an injection in 2010 of €1m in extra funding allocated towards the provision of aftercare services. While not all care leavers will require a vast amount of support, the current level of available intervention is inadequate and ad hoc. The receipt of aftercare must be dictated by ongoing needs assessments, up to and including the young person’s 21st birthday (or 23rd birthday if

\(^{20}\) There is no precise or commonly accepted definition of the term “leaving care”, but it is often used to denote the circumstances of young people leaving residential or foster care as part of their transition towards independent living and adulthood. The term does not differentiate between young people leaving as the culmination of a clearly defined and well-implemented plan, or those who may have drifted out of care in an unplanned way. (SSI Social Care Guidelines)

\(^{21}\) This was documented by the Social Service Inspectorate Report 2001; p37; available at http://lenus.ie/hse/bitstream/10147/44874/1/9165.pdf but is still unfortunately often the case in 2011.
in education). It is a positive development that the new Leaving and Aftercare Services National Policy and Procedure Documents 2011 states that the HSE will offer an Aftercare Drop in Service in each LHO that will enable any person with care history to access advice, guidance or support. Ten new aftercare workers have been appointed in 2011.

- The Child Care Act 1991 was amended via the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2011. EPIC, along with other organisations, advocated to have aftercare placed on a statutory footing thereby requiring the State to provide aftercare for all children in care, including separated children, but this was unsuccessful. EPIC are members of Action for Aftercare (see below). This group contacted the Minister for Children to express disappointment regarding the proposed passing of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2009 on 14 July 2011 without an amendment to place the provision of aftercare on a statutory basis.

Through-care model

Strategies for preparing young people to leave care need to commence from the time that they are admitted into the care system. At their most effective care planning processes are informed by the through-care model, which looks ahead to the child’s future needs and the achievement of a positive exit strategy. Planning that is based upon the positive child care principles of placement stability, continuity of care, openness in addressing issues, listening to young people’s views, promoting quality contact with family and encouraging educational attainment, is more likely to provide a platform upon which young people can leave care with the potential to cope well. Young people from the care system consistently fare worse than their peers within the community, during the first two years of leaving care. However, findings are more encouraging after two years when outcomes for care leavers progressively converge to become more compatible with peers. How well care leavers do, and how quickly they are able to get their lives on track, is influenced by the quality of leaving care preparation and aftercare support they receive, particularly in the first 6 months after leaving care. Young people in care experience greater levels of emotional and mental health difficulties, are more vulnerable to developing or having substance misuse problems, and are at greater risk of homelessness than the general population. It is therefore essential that positive mental health and wellbeing is promoted for young people in Aftercare, as well as drug services that meet the specific needs of care leavers.

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24 Dissolution of previous Government meant the Bill fell.
27 Through-care is the process by which the care provider plans and prepares for the time when it ceases to care for the young person.
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Aftercare Advocacy and Support Service

Young people in contact with EPIC have identified a number of important issues:

- Young people should be able to maintain contact and visit their previous residential centres or foster families. Young people in foster care should have the option of staying with their foster family after the age of 18 and their carers should be provided with the financial support to do so.

- Young people should be allowed to transfer from different services in different geographical areas – for example a young person recently moved to Dublin from the West and is not eligible to access aftercare services or go on the housing list in Dublin.

- A 5 year habitual residency requirement is in place, and this must be fulfilled before a young person in entitled to rent allowance.

- Social Workers/keyworkers should be supported to maintain informal contact with the young person even when the child or Social Worker moves.

- There is a need for more supported accommodation/supported lodgings for young people leaving care nationally.\(^\text{30}\)

- Standardised agreements to support young people in education with additional costs such as school supplies/equipment. Agreed standardised financial packages for young people leaving care.

- Provision of youth orientated mental health supports and addiction services for young people leaving care.

- Greater sex education for young people so they can make informed decisions regarding contraception and safe sex.

- Greater links with housing departments within local authorities to house young people from care who do not have any family links and have long term housing needs.

- Greater links with social welfare and community welfare officers regarding the needs of young people in aftercare.

- Aftercare plans – financial supports and accommodation arrangements agreed before the young person attends their final child in care review so the young person is clear about their plan.

- Give young people leaving care information on services/supports and rights and entitlements.

- Young people from the care system who become young parents lack adequate support.

\(^\text{30}\) This is currently only provided in Dublin North City.
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Action for Aftercare

EPIC has consistently pushed for the provision of aftercare and is also part of Action for Aftercare; a coalition of NGOs, practitioners and academics working to ensure that all children leaving the care system have access to aftercare services.\(^\text{31}\) Independently, and as part of this group, EPIC had pushed for amendments to the Child Care (Amendment) Bill that had progressed through the Dail with the last Government. This piece of legislation should be revisited as the Child Care (Amendment) Act did not make changes to placing the provision of aftercare on a statutory footing.\(^\text{32}\)

Aftercare membership groups

EPIC is currently represented on the Irish Aftercare Forum, the Aftercare Steering Group of the HSE Dublin North East, the HSE Leaving and Aftercare Services Implementation Group, and the Care Leavers Ireland Charity.

EPIC research and the aftercare implementation group

EPIC’s initial findings of a research study entitled ‘Outcomes for young people leaving care’ into 65 young people who left care indicate that:

- 26 of the 65 cited Social Welfare as their main source of income;
- 26 of the 65 surveyed had mental health needs, with counselling identified as the most common type of health service that young people needed but were not receiving;
- 13 of the 65 had experienced homelessness at sometime in the previous nine months;
- 24 of the 65 had inadequate independent living skills particularly in relation to rent and budgeting.

The provision of an appropriate aftercare service is a vital element in seeking to achieve positive outcomes for young people leaving care. Minister Fitzgerald announced in June 2011 at the launch of this report that as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs she is determined to oversee the successful development of a National Aftercare Service and stated that:

“The importance of having an appropriate aftercare service is reflected in the National Aftercare Policy developed by the HSE. This policy will guide and underpin the current process

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\(^{31}\) Members include: Barnardos, Children’s Rights Alliance, EPIC, Focus Ireland, the Irish Foster Care Association, the Irish Network of Aftercare Workers, Diane Duggan BL, Catherine Carty Doctoral Fellow, Child and Family Research Centre, NUI; Geoffrey Shannon Child Law Expert.

\(^{32}\) See Dail debates, for example, 23/03/11, Enda Kenny; available at: http://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2011-03-23.148.0&s=Child+Care+%28Amendment%29+Bill#g196.0 (31/03/11).
which is underway to establish a National Aftercare Service which will formalise and standardise the provision of aftercare services nationwide. This work is currently being planned and organised by an Aftercare Implementation Group and I am very happy that this group includes a young person representative from EPIC, whose experience and knowledge of care and of leaving care is invaluable.”

Minister Fitzgerald also announced the recruitment of ten additional aftercare posts, which she said she hoped would make a difference to the roll out of the National Aftercare Service.

EPIC is concerned that the development of the National Aftercare Policy has occurred without the involvement of any key official from the Department of Finance, or Department of Social Protection. EPIC is worried that the new policy, for all its good intention, will lack the necessary interdepartmental structure and authority. EPIC sit on the Aftercare Implementation Group; this group is in the final stages of the development of the aftercare policy, which is due to be implemented by Feb 2012.
Recommendations

**EPIC would like:**

- Legislation to be enacted to ensure that all young people leaving care are provided with a statutory right to an equitable, consistent, standardised aftercare service.

- *The National Policy on Leaving and Aftercare* to be resourced and implemented as soon as possible. Where necessary, the Policy needs to be adapted and developed.

- A monitoring system established that tracks the progress of a young person from the time of entry into care through to when they leave the care system in terms of their placement stability, education, aspirations, well-being etc must be developed.

- Research or tracking of young people after they have left the care system. Outcome indicators should be developed so that those receiving an aftercare service can be compared with those who have received no supports and with young people in the general population.

- Greater focus to be placed on the evaluation of child protection interventions in order to measure the effectiveness of different care placements (e.g. residential care, foster care) in terms of positive outcomes.

- Information on the educational outcomes of young people in care/leaving care to be compiled. This data would help to identify gaps in supports that are needed to facilitate young people’s participation in school as well as moving on to further education. Young people’s participation in education must be given greater priority in their care plan.

- The *Family Welfare Conferencing* approach to be used as a model for young care leavers with limited/no family/social networks, to identify family members (or extended family members/former foster-carers) that may be able to offer support to the young person when they are living independently.

- In exceptional circumstances the provision of aftercare should be sanctioned even if the young person has not been in care for a year prior to their 18th birthday.