

Impact Report

2023



empowering people in care



www.epiconline.ie

Acknowledgements

EPIC's work ethos is one of collaboration and partnership. We acknowledge and appreciate the many steadfast professionals we engaged with in 2023 who share our commitment to ensuring care-experienced children and young people's voices are heard, and that their rights are upheld. EPIC thank our principal donor, Tusla - the Child and Family Agency, for supporting the delivery of our National Advocacy Service for care-experienced children and young people, as well as our youth participation programme and research and policy work. We acknowledge and thank the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), and TU Dublin Access and Outreach Service for project funding that will serve to raise awareness and build capacity in the disability, social care, and education sectors.

The team wish to give special mention to the staff of our corporate donors and supporters Alexion, Microsoft and Emerson, and to the Children Rights Alliance for supporting our Christmas Food and Toy Appeal. We also wish to acknowledge the ongoing support received from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, through annual Care Day funding, and a small grant for a campaign and leadership programme for EPIC Youth Council and Care Community members.

Lastly, we save our special appreciation for the courageous children and young people who engaged with EPIC in 2023, be it through our National Advocacy Service or our Youth Councils and Care Community. Your observations, contributions, and successes are the driving force that push us to aim higher and work harder. You are epic!



Drawing by Lea, aged 11

Vision

A society where every child in the care system is valued, respected and heard.



Mission

To champion the rights of care-experienced children and young people, ensure their voices inform the policy and practice that affects their lives and cultivate a care aware society.

Article 12

All of EPIC's work is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 12, which provides for the child's right to be heard and to participate in decision making.

Values

Empowering



Rights-Based



Inclusive



Ambitious



How we work

National Advocacy Service



EPIC operates the only National Advocacy Service for children in care and young care leavers. Our team of Advocates provide direct 1:1 advocacy to assist children and young people to have their views and concerns represented in decisions related to their care. They also work to empower them to speak for themselves, resolve the issues and problems they experience, and access the services and resources they need to bring about positive change in their lives.

Youth Engagement & Participation



EPIC is committed to promoting positive care identities and building a strong Care Community. We aim to achieve this by providing spaces for connection, fun, and growth, as well as opportunities for action and learning by working on campaigns and projects. Our Youth Councils are representative groups of care-experienced children and young people that work with EPIC on specific issues at national level, contributing to our advocacy and engagement with Government and media.

Public & Political Engagement

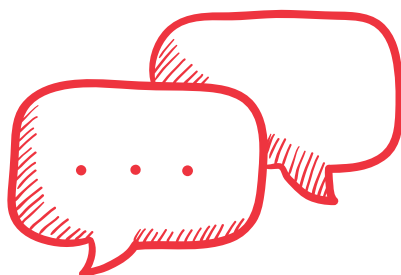


EPIC is committed to influencing society to ensure better outcomes for care-experienced youth and works to uphold their rights across national policy, legislation and practice. We conduct participative research, campaigns and projects to create awareness of the diverse experiences of children in care and care leavers. All of our public and political engagement is evidence based, informed by lived experience and data from our Advocacy Service, and serves to progress EPIC's vision - a society where every child in the care system is valued, respected and heard.

Strategic Goals

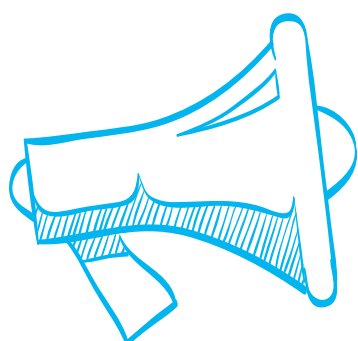
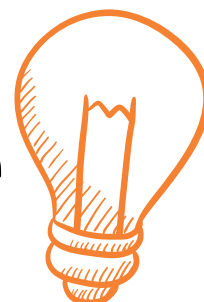


- 01 Providing quality, effective and independent rights-based advocacy directly to care-experienced children and young people up to the age of 26



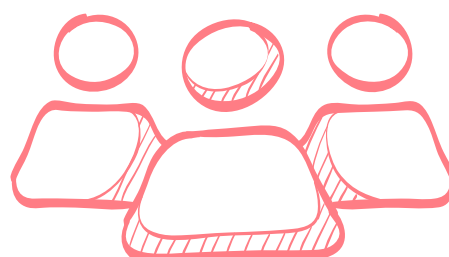
- 02 Ensuring the voices of our Care Community are heard where it matters

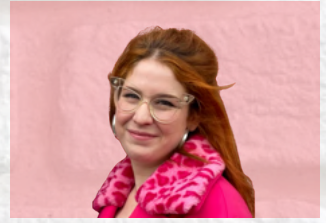
- 03 Producing agenda-setting policy and research that is informed by lived experiences



- 04 Raising awareness, educating and campaigning for transformational change in society

- 05 Being a vibrant, well governed and resourced organisation





EPIC Team

in 2023





Providing quality, effective and independent rights-based advocacy to care-experienced children and young people

Increasing visibility and understanding of EPIC's independent Advocacy Service among care-experienced children and young people and key stakeholders

EPIC's National Advocacy Service caseload has grown year on year, with a majority of requests for an Advocate being made by children and young people themselves. In 2023, the team worked across Ireland, assisting 581 children and young people on a total of 869 advocacy cases. A detailed analysis of the Advocacy Service in 2023 can be found in our [National Advocacy Service Report](#).

Alongside the provision of independent advocacy, the team play a vital role in raising awareness through external engagements, the delivery of information sessions, and presenting at national conferences and seminars.

In 2023, the team delivered 140 information sessions about EPIC to staff teams and children in care, and 40 on-site information and advocacy sessions in special care and youth detention settings. In these sessions, children learn about their rights while in care, what independent advocacy is, and other ways they can get involved with EPIC. Additionally, over 10,000 information resources were sent to residential and special care homes, Oberstown Children Detention Campus, fostering services and social work departments. They include a 'Know Your Rights in Care' poster, information for LGBTQ+ children in care, and general information about EPIC's National Advocacy Service and youth engagement and participation programme.

During 2023, EPIC hosted a dialogue series with members of Tusla's senior management team. This provided a space for knowledge exchange and discussion on key developments pertinent to EPIC and Tusla. The first dialogue was with William McNamara, National Lead for Aftercare. William presented on aftercare services since Tusla's establishment, challenges and gaps, and the provisions of the new Tusla Aftercare Strategy. The second dialogue was with Jacqueline

Smyth, National Lead for Foster Care. Jacqueline briefed the team on the implementation of Tusla's Strategic Plan for Foster Care Services and the work being done to encourage more people to foster. Lastly, John Fox, National Lead for Residential Care, presented on the progress and challenges in children's residential care. The team used the dialogue series to highlight observations and concerns from our advocacy service data, as well as from our research and policy work.

Throughout the year, the advocacy team presented at a number of national conferences and contributed to Aftercare Steering Committees and Foster Care Committees. Our Regional Advocacy Service Manager, Barry O'Sullivan, and Western Advocate, Brenda Kneafsey, presented on EPIC's work with care-experienced parents at The Independent Guardian Ad Litem Agency (TIGALA) conference. Fiona Murray, our Dublin Advocacy Service Manager, delivered an insightful presentation on how we can actively prevent care-leaver homelessness at the Cluid Youth Housing Conference. Fiona also worked with our Senior Youth Engagement Coordinator, Aoife Murphy, to deliver a workshop for children at the Irish Foster Care Association's Annual Conference. Members of EPIC's Cork and Limerick team had engagements at the launch of Tusla Kerry's For a recruitment drive, and a presentation on our new research report, Headphones, Odd Shoes and A Second Chance at Life: An Exploration of the Experiences of Children in Care and Care-Leavers with Disabilities, at the Social Work Conference in UCC – see page 25 for more on this first of its kind study.

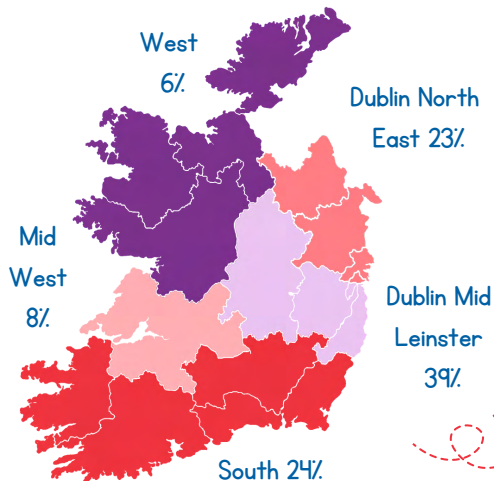
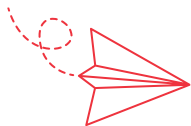
Staff also delivered talks to students in universities across Ireland, to raise awareness of both EPIC and the issues children in care and young care-leavers are facing. This is an important aspect of EPIC's outreach, as it helps to inform the next generation of social care, social work, and youth work professionals and equip them with key information that will aid them in their careers.

Providing quality, effective,
and independent rights-
based advocacy directly to
care-experienced children
and young people to age 26.



869

Advocacy cases



581



Individual children and young people were supported



38

Under 12



240

12-18yrs



303

18yrs+



304



Female

266



Male

11



Trans or non-binary

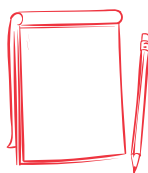
Main Presenting Issues



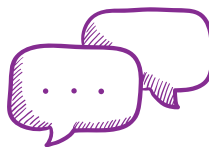
Access to services



Placement



Aftercare Plan



Family Contact



Under 18s



Accommodation



Legal



Homeless



Access to services



18 - 26yrs

EPIC believe that all children and young people with care-experience should have the right to independent professional advocacy, as it empowers them to play an active role in decision-making on key aspects of their lives.

While a child in care's right to an advocate is recognised in UN conventions and recommended in state inquiries such as The Ryan Report, this right has yet to be enshrined in law. This results in a lack of equity for children in care with regards to accessing an independent advocacy service.

Children and young people with care-experience are often expected to engage with a complex array of systems and processes, as well as a range of professionals and state agencies that most adults would find difficult to navigate.

In 2023, EPIC published [Amplifying Voices](#), which details the case for enshrining the right to independent advocacy, and how the government can move towards legislating for this. EPIC believe that robust monitoring and reporting systems for advocacy services should be developed, so learning from individual cases leads to better services and outcomes for children in care. The Publication of Heads of Bill for the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 in April provided EPIC with further opportunity to spotlight our call for independent advocacy to be enshrined in law.

In May, EPIC's CEO and Research and Policy Manager, Marissa Ryan and Conor Stitt, briefed the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the topic of Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill. They were joined by colleagues in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), Tusla, The Ombudsman for Children's Office, Barnardos Ireland, TIGALA, the Irish Foster Care Association and Early Childhood Ireland. EPIC's recommendations on the review were based on over 20 years of working directly with children in care and care-leavers. EPIC also made a written [Submission on the General Scheme of the Child Care \(Amendment\) Bill 2023](#) and included investment in independent advocacy as a measure in our Pre-Budget Submission 2024.

The Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published its report in July 2023. EPIC was delighted to see the Committee endorse our recommendation for independent advocacy to be enshrined in law, among others. The Committee also recommended that resources and regulations should be provided accordingly.

Independent advocacy services can and do support statutory authorities to effectively meet their duties as corporate parents. They can improve children's experience of alternative care and their outcomes beyond the care system. For example, the data from our National Advocacy Service plays a pivotal role in shaping the development of EPIC's programmes and policies. It enables us to identify and monitor ongoing and emerging trends, as well as the daily challenges faced by the community of children and young people EPIC works with.



**Independent advocacy
helps to empower
children in care and
care experienced
young people.**



EPIC's partnership with Community Law and Mediation (CLM) continued during 2023, with 12 free legal clinics held for children and young people engaging with our National Advocacy Service. 35 children and young people availed of the service and 43 legal matters were dealt with. The main presenting issues related to childcare law, civil complaints, aftercare, and situations of domestic violence. With legal matters being one of the highest presenting issues for young care-leavers in the Advocacy Service during 2023, the CLM and EPIC partnership continues to meet a previously unmet need.

At the end of 2022, the Service and Quality Committee of Tusla's Board requested that EPIC provide an independent advocacy service to children and young people in the care of Tusla who are placed in Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs). Following consultation with Tusla's interim CEO, interim Director of Services and Integration, and the Regional Chief Officers for Dublin Mid-Leinster (DML) and Dublin Northeast (DNE) funding was approved for EPIC to provide this service to children in DML and DNE.

It was agreed that EPIC would work with colleagues in Tusla to ensure these children and young people have a voice and are heard in relation to their care and wellbeing, and are supported with information and advice on various options and opportunities available to them.

Towards the end of 2023, EPIC held a successful recruitment campaign which saw the appointment of two new Advocates to deliver this dedicated advocacy service to children and young people in SEAs in DNE and DML. The pilot will commence in early 2024.

Independent Advocacy Service



**Request an EPIC Advocate
at epiconline.ie**



Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm



info@epiconline.ie



01 872 7661



Cork, Dublin, Limerick & Mayo





2

Ensuring the voices of our Care Community are heard where it matters

Growing and diversifying EPIC's participation work

2023 was another exciting year for youth engagement and participation at EPIC. In addition to an impressive portfolio of work conducted by the EPIC Youth Councils and Care Community members, we welcomed a new Youth Engagement and Participation (YEP) team to the organisation. Aoife Murphy, Emma-Louise Carroll, and Shane Smart took up the roles of Senior Youth Engagement Coordinator, and our Regional and Dublin Youth Engagement and Participation Leads.

The team dedicated their first months at EPIC to meeting children and young people engaged with EPIC and learning from them to inform their priorities for 2024. Central to their planning was exploring how EPIC can grow and diversify its offering and expand activities to harder to reach youth.



Aoife (she/her)



Shane (he/him)



Emma-Louise (she/her)



EPIC continued its new Pride tradition, with our second ever bloc at the Dublin Pride March in June. EPIC Youth Council members spent the weeks in the run up to Pride cutting out stencils and painting their sparkling blue banner with the message, 'Love Should Never Mean Living in Fear'.

On the morning of Pride, we attended the Belong To and Youth Work Ireland pre-Pride breakfast, where we met Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman. After a quick photo with the Minister, and armed with sunscreen, we took to the streets of Dublin to march with pride. It was an amazing day, topped off by the excitement of being featured on the evening news!

Participating in Pride is an important part of EPIC's commitment to advance intersectionality, solidarity, and our work with minorities in the care system as set out in our Strategic Plan. It is about showing up, living our values, and supporting our LGBTQ+ care-experienced community to be proud of who they are.



EPIC Youth Council and Care Community members, staff, friends and allies marching at Dublin Pride

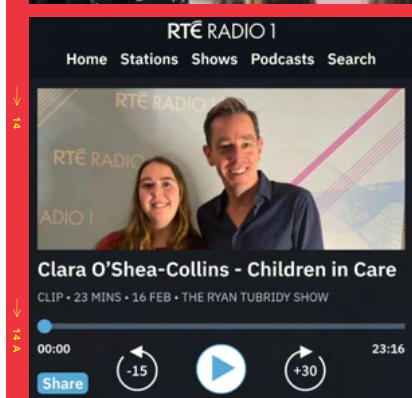
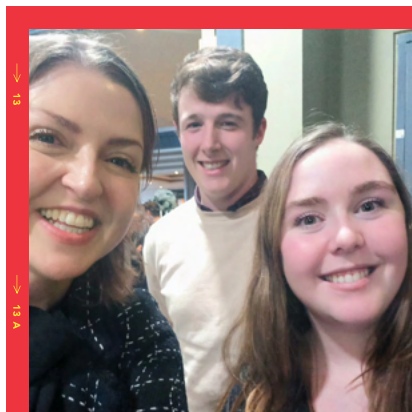


At EPIC, our unwavering commitment is to empower children and young people by identifying and creating opportunities for them to influence change and raise awareness. In 2023, EPIC Youth Council members participated in a range of engagements and activities, from national media and conferences to high level meetings with key stakeholders. What follows are some highlights of Council activities during 2023.

January: EPIC Youth Council members, Clara O'Shea Collins and Rory Brown, and EPIC CEO, Marissa Ryan, delivered a workshop at the Education and Training Boards (ETB) Ireland Conference on supporting care-experienced children in classrooms. The workshop gave insights on how children in care experience school, challenges they can face, and how educators can help support children in care.

February: Clara O'Shea Collins spoke with Ryan Tubridy on RTE Radio One. The national broadcast went out on the eve of Care Day, the annual celebration of the achievements and contributions of care-experienced children and young people. Clara discussed the Care Day Embrace Our Stories exhibition developed by members of the EPIC Youth Councils and Care Community, and her journey to becoming a qualified social worker. You can read more about this exhibition and our Care Day 2023 celebrations on page 21.

March: Council members joined women from diverse, disability and minority backgrounds at the Houses of the Oireachtas. The event was organised by Women for Election to engage with the Women's Caucus on the theme, 'Gender Equality in Politics.' On behalf of the women of the EPIC Youth Council, Andrea Reilly delivered an address alongside representatives from AkiDwA, the Irish Traveller Movement, Trans Equality Together and the Irish Second-Level Student's Union. This was Andrea's first public speaking engagement with EPIC. She was commended by Senator Fiona O'Loughlin, Chair of the Women's Caucus, who said that Andrea spoke with far more confidence than she had when she first spoke in the Dáil chamber. An abridged version of Andrea's speech can be found on the following page.



Epic Speech!

Extracts from a speech delivered
by Youth Council member
Andrea in the Dáil on
International Women's Day 2023.

"I am joined today by a group of care-experienced women and staff from EPIC, and we are here to show that despite the stigma and prejudice that exists in society about the care system, we are part of the future of this country."

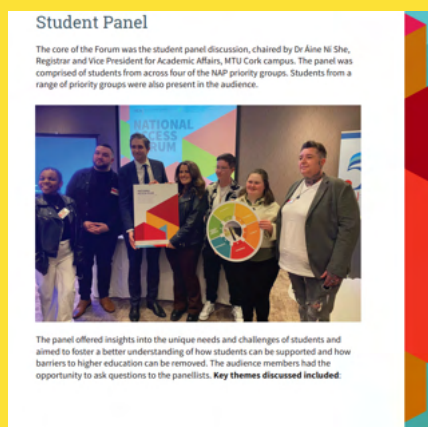
"There are approximately 6,000 children in state care, and around 500 young people leave care each year in Ireland, many of those being young women. These young women have had such unique and often challenging experiences growing up and have such impactful voices which can change the way we view politics today."

"If given the opportunity, care-leavers can offer such insightful knowledge in sectors such as education, homelessness and housing, disability, and justice, as well as in the child and youth sector, and can make a massive difference to how the policies in these sectors are made going forward using our own experience."

"I believe women bring such a different perspective to politics. They can often be more empathetic and understanding to the social and economic issues women, children and families face. Women of different backgrounds, including care-leavers, have demonstrated they are strong, resilient, and capable, and having us in politics would send an important message to future generations that our voices and contributions are necessary."

"So, let's embrace women, embrace equity, and embrace our stories, to work towards creating a more diverse and inclusive political landscape. You are all EPIC!"





March: EPIC launched a first of its kind participative study exploring the experiences of children in care and young care leavers with disabilities, which you can read more about on page 21. The launch of this research marked the start of a national campaign led by EPIC's CEO and Research and Policy Manager, Marissa Ryan and Conor Stitt, alongside Andrea O'Reilly and Alan Fay from the Youth Council. Both Andrea and Alan contributed to the research as youth advisors and research participants. During 2023, Andrea and Alan featured on RTE Radio's Drivetime show to discuss the research and met with key stakeholders -the CEO of the HSE, Bernard Gloster, Minister of State for Disability, Anne Rabbitte, and the Senior Tusla Management team - to talk about the situation of children and young people in care with disabilities. Alan and Andrea also spoke of their own experiences growing up in care, and what needs to change.

April: Kai Brosnan joined a student panel at the National Access Forum to discuss access, and barriers, to further and higher education for young care-leavers and other young people who are under-represented in 3rd level education. Kai's recommendations were reflected in the Forum report, along with points he made during the discussion about accessible information and intersectionality.

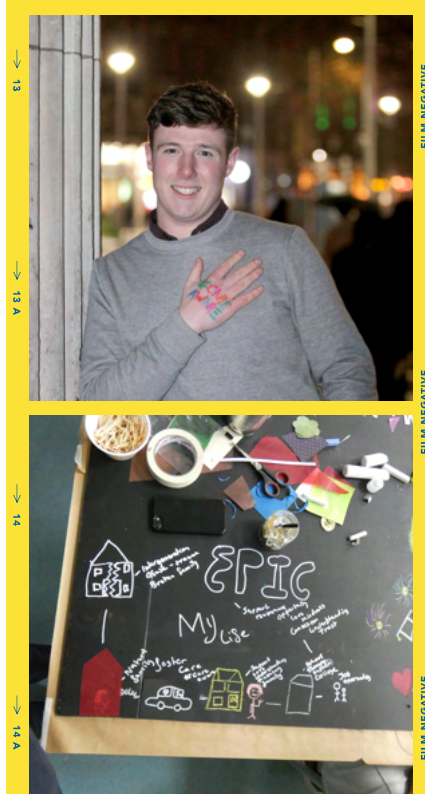
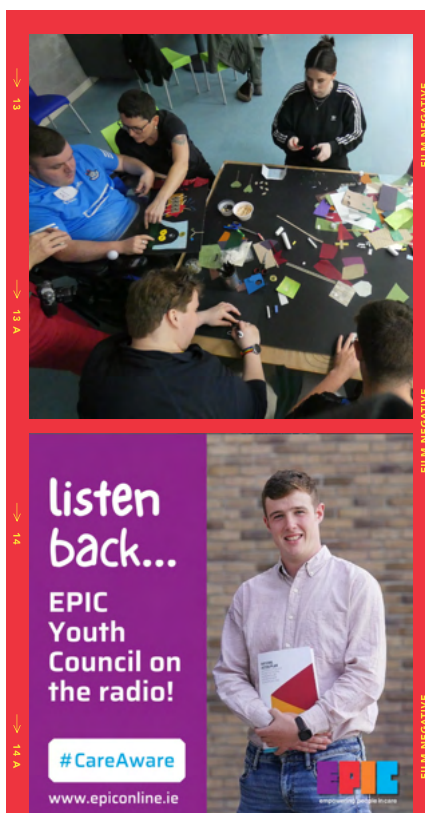
June: EPIC was invited to present at the HSE Rainbow Conference - A Day of Rainbows: Connecting Together for LGBTQ+ Young People. Kai Joined EPIC CEO, Marissa Ryan, to present to colleagues across the health and social care sector. Kai presented on the Coming Out in Care project which developed EPIC's LGBTQ+ resources and made practical suggestions to support healthcare workers in their practice.



July: Members of the over 18s Youth Council and Care Community travelled to Limerick for a consultation to inform our new Education Project. It was an amazing, funny, and insightful weekend with Mary and Sarah from EPIC's project partner, Kid's Own. The creative consultation process with Kid's Own and care-experienced youth will inform new resources for primary and secondary school teachers, making schools more care aware. To learn more about our Education Project, see page 29.

August: EPIC Youth Council member, Rory Brown, who also sits on the Advisory Group for our Education Project, appeared on Drivetime to discuss CSO data on educational outcomes of children and young people in care, and how they can be better supported in schools. Rory also contributed to EPIC's media statement in response to the data and called on the government to act. "Speaking as someone who was in care and who knows the value of education as a teacher, I believe this report has been slow coming, and action is needed now to prevent our education system from failing more young people in care, as it has failed too many already. The data does not inform us of the retention rates of care leavers in further and higher education. Until a report is done on this, the true picture of how children in the care system progress through the full educational system will not be known."

September: The under 18's members of our Care Community participated in a second series of consultations with Kid's Own and our education project manager, Tara Madden. Together, they shared their insights on being care-experienced in school, what worked well for them, and what didn't! Their valuable insights and suggestions were captured by Kid's Own writers and artists and will be documented in the new resource for teachers and principals.





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October: Emily Hanbidge delivered a speech at the launch of Tusla's National Fostering Week. This annual public awareness campaign was launched by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Daithí de Róiste, in the Mansion House. The campaign aims to encourage people from all walks and all communities in Ireland to consider fostering. In her speech, Emily shared her experience of foster care and encouraged people to “take that leap of faith and foster a child.” This was Emily’s first public engagement with EPIC, and she received a standing ovation – go Emily!

November: The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) approached EPIC in relation to an imminent announcement about two new funding streams for care-leaver students. Kai Brosnan responded to the news of new funding for student accommodation costs and apprenticeships in the DCEDIY press release. He said, “Minister Harris has shown his commitment to create meaningful change for care-leavers through working with EPIC and taking the time to listen to our voices ... Other departments should learn from this good practice and make the same effort to support care-experienced children and young people. Children in care are a whole-of-government responsibility, this doesn’t solely lie with the Department of Children and Tusla, as evidenced by Minister Harris’ announcement today.”

Jess Duffy contributed to a student panel hosted by Trinity College Dublin for College Awareness Week 2023. The webinar was broadcast across schools in Ireland and aimed to promote the idea of going to college by hearing from local role models. Jess shared her journey through the education system, highlighting that some paths are not always clear or don't go to plan. Jess spoke about her experience of being a child in care, the stigma around this, and how despite this challenge in life she is determined to succeed.

Epic Speech!

Extracts from a speech delivered by Youth Council member Emily at Tusla's National Fostering Week 2023.

"I joined the EPIC Youth Council because I wanted to play my part in helping foster children find their voices, and to help end the stigma that can affect some foster children. Some people seem to think that if you are a foster child that you are damaged goods, which is so not the case. In fact, it's the polar opposite."

"Foster kids are brave to a fault, they are seriously resilient and compassionate. A lot of foster children go into fields that require caring for others ... I have a million other positive words I could use for foster children"

"All a foster child needs is love, patience, compassion, understanding, and to feel seen and heard. And here is a perfect example of what being in a foster family can do for a child."

"I was in foster care for about a month when mam was clearing out the hot-press. She came across a tiger teddy and handed it to me saying, I kept this. It was yours when you were here last time."

"In that moment I had a massive sense of belonging. Now, it wasn't always easy in our home. No home is ever always easy. But it is my home even now, and it was, and is, still a pretty amazing place."

"Research shows that children raised in a family unit, either foster care or relative care, thrive, and achieve the best outcomes ... I hope my story helps you to see why it's so important for people to take that leap of faith and foster a child."



EPIC was also delighted to have the TU Dublin Access and Outreach team host the Embrace Our Stories exhibition on campus for College Awareness Week. The launch was a massive success. Those who attended heard from Kai, who spoke about developing the exhibition and the theme behind it, as well as his own journey as a care-experienced student.

Andrea and Marissa attended the Annual Youth Diversion Projects National Conference in Croke Park, which was hosted by Minister James Browne TD. They presented on the intersection of children in care and youth justice to over 300 professionals, and how the National Youth Justice Strategy can be advanced to meet the needs of children in care and young care-leavers.

Andrea also joined our education project manager, Tara, to deliver a presentation at the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Network conference on EPIC's Education Project and the importance of making schools more care aware.

EPIC could not be prouder of the expansive and diverse portfolio of work undertaken by Council members during 2023. Between them, they advocated at local and national level on a range of issues that are important to children in care and young care-leavers, and that impact care experiences. EPIC extends its gratitude to Council members for their time, commitment and valuable input to campaigns, research, and EPIC as a whole.



On #CareDay23 eve, we launched the 'Embrace Our Stories' exhibition at the CHQ Building with friends & colleagues



Exhibition 2023 Tour

- CHQ Building (Feb)
- Irish Foster Care Association Conference (Sept)
- Irish Aftercare Conference (Oct)
Conference, Athlone
- TU Dublin (Nov)

On Friday, 17 February 2023, care-experienced children and young people across Ireland celebrated their eighth annual Care Day. Care Day was established in 2016 to celebrate the positive experiences and contributions of care-experienced children and young people. Care Day is also about creating a sense of community across the world for those with care experience, to help children and young people support each other and be proud of who they are.

For Care Day 2023, the theme agreed by EPIC Care Community and Youth Council members was "Don't judge a book by its cover, embrace our stories instead!" Through an innovative photo-voice project titled "[Embrace Our Stories](#)" participants invited people to learn from their experiences and about their hopes, and see that every care-experienced child and young person is an individual with their own unique story to tell.

Embrace Our Stories was launched on Care Day eve at the CHQ Building in Dublin. Minister Roderic O'Gorman opened the event, which also had contributions from EPIC Youth Council members Clara O'Shea Collins and Kai Brosnan, Minister Joe O'Brien, interim CEO of Tusla, Kate Duggan, and the Ombudsperson for Children, Niall Muldoon. On the night, Kai from the EPIC Youth Council shared a few words about the exhibition and process of developing it and why Care Day is important for him. Later in the year, the exhibition was displayed at the Irish Aftercare Network's Annual Conference, the Irish Foster Care Association Conference, and in TU Dublin as part of its College Awareness Week activities.

Epic Speech!

Extracts from a speech delivered by Youth Council member Kai at the launch of 'Embrace Our Stories' on Care Day Eve 2023.

"Resilience isn't always a quality people want. It comes from having no choice but to be strong when facing adversity. However, by celebrating Care Day, and celebrating our lives, and our achievements despite these adversities, it allows us to be soft, it allows us to be human, and it allows us to challenge the stigma and stereotypes that some of us grew up hearing."

"I would like to tell you a little bit about what Care Day means to me ... I've always seen Care Day as a little milestone. It allows me to reflect back on how much I've grown, healed, and achieved in the past year."

"If there's one thing I wish younger me knew about, it would be the existence of both EPIC and Care Day. Hearing the stories of other care-experienced people, and seeing the positive lives and extraordinary accomplishments they've achieved, I know it would have given me so much more hope and allowed me to know that I'm just as capable as any of my peers."

"I look around at the members on the Council with me, and every day, but particularly Care Day, they remind me that we are not our experience. Our experience will always be a part of us, but who we are is so much more than that."

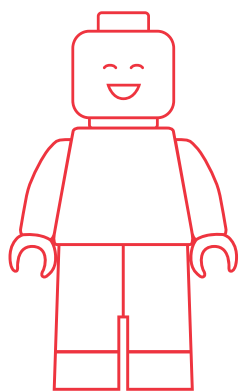
"It's through taking the time to meet with and listen to the stories of care-experienced people that we can begin to erase some of the stigma we prove wrong every day."



Care Day participation activities included several creative actions and virtual events to ensure all children and young people could get involved. Our new Lego competition was an idea put forward by under 18s Council members, Cian Walsh – thank you Cian! EPIC staff were delighted to support Care Day celebrations happening across the country and celebrate beautifully decorated Care Day spaces in children's residential homes, special care, and Oberstown Children Detention Campus. Friends and colleagues all over Ireland shared their support through videos and photos, including the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman, interim CEO of Tusla, Kate Duggan, the Ombudsperson for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, and Bernard Gloster, CEO of the HSE.

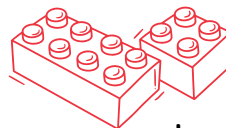
Collectively, we got #CareDay23 trending on social media and we reached thousands of people through our celebration! New Care Day partners came on board with Treehouse Practice hosting a workshop on the importance of the language we use, while Tusla Mayo celebrated an incredible art exhibition by children in care at the Linenhall Arts Centre in Castlebar.

EPIC's Care Day activities are funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and supported by Tusla and the Ombudsperson for Children's Office – among many others! If you are interested in hosting the Embrace Our Stories Photography Exhibition, please contact carolinereid@epiconline.ie.



5

virtual photography
exhibition



Lego competition



book sharing



bookmark
competition

best decorated
space



virtual participation events



Youth Council member
Clara interviewed on
RTE's Ryan Tubridy show.



#CareDay23
featured in
The Irish Times

3 Producing agenda-setting policy and research

Building and using our evidence base to inform our policy work

EPIC is committed to developing policy positions directly informed by our National Advocacy Service data and youth engagement and participation programme. To this end, during 2023 we published four policy submissions, developed a position paper on the right to independent advocacy, and delivered a high-level briefing to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the topic of Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023.

Our policy work included a Submission to Public Consultation on the next Government Policy Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making, as well as submissions on the National Strategy for Migrant Integration and on the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023.

As detailed on page 09, in April, EPIC published its position paper, Amplifying Voices, which makes the case for legislating for the right to independent advocacy for children in care. Independent advocacy services already exist in Ireland and have proven beneficial for realisation of the rights of marginalised groups.

EPIC welcomed the passing of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2022, which recognised a child's legal right to be heard in judicial proceedings via a Guardian ad Litem. However, legal proceedings are only a small part of a child's care journey, if at all. EPIC firmly believes that independent advocacy should be recognised in law as a mechanism to ensure a child's right to be heard extends to critical meetings that occur outside of Court, such as child in care reviews.



In May, EPIC CEO, Marissa Ryan, and our Research and Policy Manager, Conor Stitt, delivered a briefing to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the topic of **Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023**. The Child Care Amendment Bill, which will update the Child Care Act (1991), is a rare and significant opportunity to reform our legislation to create positive, lasting change in the protection and welfare of children in Ireland.

In the Briefing, Marissa and Conor highlighted opportunities in the Bill which would ensure that children in care are supported to thrive and achieve the best possible outcomes, including when they transition to adulthood. Their input included recommendations on independent advocacy, voluntary care, Section 5, and the duty to cooperate across relevant Departments and state agencies.

Marissa and Conor also noted certain provisions that were not in the General Scheme, including aftercare eligibility criteria, a dedicated section to support unaccompanied minors, and a much-needed update to the in-camera rule.

In our **Pre-Budget Submission 2024**, our measures included action on priority issues that, with enhanced fiscal support, would result in better outcomes for children in care and young care-leavers. EPIC called on the government to invest in the recruitment and retention of social work professionals and foster carers. We also called for public funds to be directed to independent advocacy for children in care, state operated residential homes, and transitional accommodation to reduce the risk of care-leaver homelessness. In October, we welcomed the news that Budget 2024 was to include measures to increase the overall capacity in children's residential care, an increase to the fostering allowance, and a commitment to improve the recruitment and retention of staff working with children in care. However, we warned that budgetary measures must be matched by political attention and inter-departmental action if we are to ensure that the needs of children in state care and those leaving care are met.



EPIC CEO, Marissa Ryan, and our Research and Policy Manager, Conor Stitt, at the Briefing to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the topic of **Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023**

“I have read the report, and I am confident that it will be the start of more awareness, understanding, and inclusive practice among anyone working with those in care with disabilities.”

~Andrea Reilly, EPIC Youth Council member and youth advisor on Headphones report project.

EPIC is committed to identifying and developing partnerships, funding, and resource opportunities for research that will improve the lives and care experiences of the community EPIC works with.

In March, EPIC launched a first of its kind participative study titled, [Headphones, Odd Shoes & A Second Chance at Life](#). This research was funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and aimed to gather evidence on the lived experiences of children in care and care leavers with disabilities. The origin of this project is rooted in recommendations made by EPIC Youth Council members living with disabilities, who noted the lack of research in this area. Deborah Erwin conducted this study on behalf of EPIC, with ethical approval granted by Tusla's Research Ethics Committee.

At the launch, Deborah paid tribute to the children and young people who participated in the study, some of whom attended and spoke on the day. EPIC Youth Council members, Andrea Reilly and Alan Fay, who also acted as youth advisors for the project, spoke of their care-experiences as children with disabilities. They also shared reflections on the process of sitting on the Youth Advisory Group that informed the research design. EPIC was delighted to have input from Des Delaney, of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Breda Crehan-Roche, of the HSE, and Robbie Gilligan, of Trinity College Dublin at the launch.



Speakers committed their departments and agencies to using the research and accounts of young people to inform policy and legislation going forward. This launch marked the start of a focused campaign by EPIC, alongside Council members, to progress the recommendations of the report. A programme of awareness raising at national level began, see the following page for more on this campaign journey.

The success of the Headphones report was followed by two further research grants in 2023. In partnership with the TU Dublin Access and Outreach Service, EPIC has commissioned a research project involving care-experienced young people who have pursued higher education in Ireland. This research will be undertaken by Dr. Merike Darmody, a Research Officer at the Economic and Social Research Institute. It will investigate the key factors that lead to care-experienced students accessing and completing higher education, as well as examining the reasons why some could not access or complete their course.

EPIC also received funding from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to conduct a research project on the experiences of state care amongst children and young people who have sought international protection. This tender was awarded to Dr. Muireann Ní Raghallaigh, Dr. Prospera Tadam and Dr. Joanne Kelleher from the UCD School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice.

EPIC's hope is that our research will provide better understanding of the needs, challenges and perspectives of these children and young people, as well as inform policy and practice to improve their access to rights. Both studies are due to be published in 2024.



EPIC's last objective under this strategic goal is to use our evidence base to advocate for national change to policy and practice. EPIC's main campaign focus for 2023 was progressing the policy recommendations in the Headphones report and raising awareness of the situation for children in care and care-leavers with disabilities. EPIC Youth Council members, Andrea Reilly and Alan Fay, led on this campaign, with EPIC CEO, Marissa Ryan, and our Research and Policy Manager, Conor Stitt. During 2023, they attended high-level meetings to discuss the report with Tusla's senior management team, Minister of State for Disability, Anne Rabbitte, and the CEO of the HSE, Bernard Gloster. We were heartened by the support received for our disability project, and by the commitments made to ensure children in care with disabilities thrive and achieve the best possible outcomes. Following our campaign win in 2022 which saw care-leavers being named as a priority group in the National Access Plan: National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education (NAP), in late November, Minister Simon Harris.

confirmed the roll-out of €1.15 million in funding to support care-leavers and members of the Traveller and Roma communities. The funding will include student accommodation costs for young care leavers and new funding for apprenticeships for care-leavers.

Speaking on RTE, Minister Harris said that **"this came about because of the incredible work of a group called EPIC, Empowering People in Care who work with children in care"**! We want to acknowledge the members of our Youth Council who played a pivotal role in securing this funding: Clara and Rory, who were central to the campaign to have care-leavers named a priority group in the 2022 NAP and Kai, who spoke at the National Access Forum in April and contributed to the Department press release announcing the new funding streams.

Central to our research and policy goal is ensuring that the voices of our Care Community are heard in our publications and beyond them. EPIC will continue to realise this by providing opportunities for our children and young people to speak directly to decision makers about the care system.

EPIC's 2023 national conference participation



- Education and Training Boards Ireland Annual Conference
- Youth Diversion Projects Conference
- The Social Personal and Health Education Conference
- Forasa Trade Union Conference
- The Independent Guardian ad Litem Agency (TIGALA) Conference
- Cluid Housing Conference
- Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness Conference.





Coalitions, Committees + Advisory Groups

- Trans Equality Together Coalition
- Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness
- The Department for Further & Higher Education's National Access Plan 2022-2028 Steering Group
- The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth Stakeholder Advisory Group for the Care Experiences Project
- The Department of Justice Youth Justice Advisory Group

5



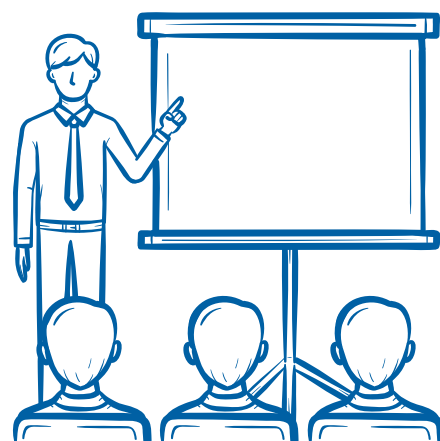
Policy submissions

- Pre-Budget Submission 2024
- Submission to Public Consultation on the next Government Policy Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making
- Enshrining the Right to Independent Advocacy
- Submission on the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023
- Submission: National Strategy for Migrant Integration



Our Research and Policy Manager, Conor, appeared on Drivetime to discuss our Budget 2024 Submission

Briefing to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the topic of Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023





4

Raising awareness, educating and campaigning for transformational change in society

Enhancing public engagement and visibility to cultivate a care aware society

EPIC's Youth Council and the children in our National Advocacy Service have long identified schools as a place for awareness raising activities to address issues related to the care system and improve support for care-experienced students. EPIC Youth Council members note that schools are the one place where children in care mix daily with their peers, and where the support of adult professionals can improve a child's care journey, positively influencing their social, health and educational outcomes. However, during a research consultation delivered by EPIC in April 2022, teachers and guidance counsellors reported that they lack the knowledge, skills, and capacity to engage their pupils on care issues, despite their willingness to do so. This led EPIC to identify funding to pilot an Education Project.

EPIC's Education Project

With the support of the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), EPIC commenced its Education Project in 2023. It aims to raise awareness of the situation of care-experienced children in schools and to develop the capacity of teachers to support them.

As EPIC Youth Council Member, project youth advisor, and primary school teacher, Rory Brown, emphasised, **“All Principals and teachers should be equipped to make their schools inclusive of children from different backgrounds – including those that are in care who are an invisible minority.”** This was echoed by principals and teachers interviewed in a consultation conducted by EPIC as the education project progressed.



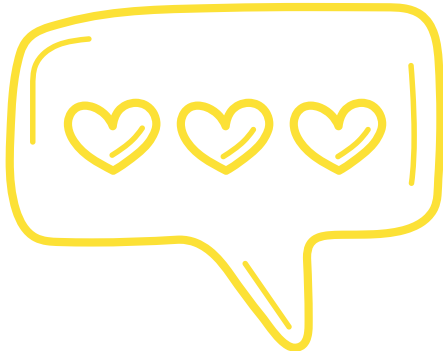
An Oversight Committee was established with representatives from the Department of Education Inspectorate, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), TESS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), a youth advisor, and a retired primary school principal and foster carer. The Oversight Committee met regularly throughout the year, providing guidance, sharing expertise and championing the project within their wider networks.

A primary output of the project is the development of school resources to highlight the experiences of care-experienced students in relation to school and to make recommendations for better supporting them. In collaboration with creative arts organisation Kids' Own, EPIC held a series of consultations with care-experienced children and young people aged 14 to 26 to elicit their experiences and suggestions for schools. A two-day art-based, participative workshop was held with members of EPIC's over 18s Youth Council in Limerick in July. Facilitated by a writer and an artist from Kids' Own and with support from EPIC staff, the care-experienced young people shared insights into the important role that school plays in their lives and care journeys. Further consultations were held with children in care in Dublin and Kildare and their views will be shared with schools via a book called Take Care.

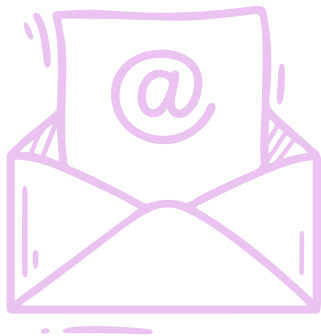
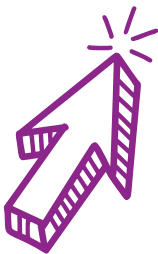
A Schools' Guide will accompany this resource with the aim of providing practical information for schools. The resources will be launched in 2024 and EPIC will work with a number of schools throughout the country to pilot the resources once published.



18+ EPIC Youth Council members with our Education Manager, Tara Madden, and Mary and Sarah from Kid's Own at the Limerick consultation to inform a new resource for primary and secondary school teachers.



16,500

supporters across our
social channelsQuarterly EPIC
News launched!Featured across national and local
media, including the Irish Times,
Irish Examiner, Irish Independent,
RTE Radio One, Six One News and
Newstalk

3

Communications
policies
developedStaff attended World
Refugee Day rally, anti-
racism rallies and rally
following the Dublin riotsDigital Media
Officer role
created

1

accessible
website in
development

Under goal four of our Strategic Plan, we made a commitment to promote diversity and inclusion by being an accessible organisation. This means accessible offices and reaching as many care-experienced people as possible by making sure our communications are accessible. By accessible, we mean the practice of making our communications usable for as many people as possible. People with disabilities have different barriers to accessing print and digital media – for example, someone with colour blindness may not be able to understand information presented in certain colours, while someone using a screen reader may not be able to navigate our website properly.

To meet this objective, we developed an Accessible Information and Communications Policy. The project was led by our Digital Media Officer, Ellie Mahony, with support from our Communications Manager, Caroline Reid. The process included research into the unique ways people may access our information and best practice from organisations with expertise in this area. Work also began work on a style guide for word documents, presentations, and emails, as well as accessible templates for staff use.

Our accessibility journey in 2023 also involved a brand identity review. We set out to refresh our look and improve uniformity across our communications products. Feedback from children and young people told us that the EPIC logo was important to them, so we chose to build on our current brand identity. We identified three key audiences that we communicate with – children, young people, and professionals – and we developed our identity with each audience in mind. We expanded our colour palette, added reoccurring symbols and designs, and updated our fonts all through the lens of accessibility. Other additions to our brand identity include stock images that can be used to represent the children and young people we work with. The stock images that appear in the guidelines went through a consultation process with members of EPIC's Youth Councils to ensure that the images are representative of the children and young people EPIC works with.

In 2023, we secured a website redevelopment budget, and work commenced on the project towards the end of 2023. The new EPIC website will be built and designed to meet EU Accessibility Regulations, with additional funding secured to have the new website audited by AI Labs before going live in 2024.



5 Being a vibrant, well governed and resourced organisation

Opportunities for Growth

Goal Five of our Strategic Plan 2022-2027 is to be a vibrant, well governed, and resourced organisation. Under this goal EPIC excelled, with new multi-project funding streams, including two participative research projects and an Education Project. In 2023, we also saw increased capacity across our advocacy, operations, and public and political engagement teams. We were delighted to receive a clean audit report from Whelan Dowling and Associates, which was approved by our Board at their AGM.

Building the Capacity of Our Staff

Each year, EPIC staff and the management team identify professional development training opportunities that will aid their work. Throughout 2023, all staff benefited from external training relevant to their roles. In addition, EPIC's frontline staff receive regular external supervision from an independent professional practitioner and all staff have access to EPIC's Employee Assistance Programme.

Training in 2023

PAL Training, GAISCE | Leadership for Life Training, Foróige | Recognising and Responding to the Impacts of Domestic Abuse on Women and Children, Women's Aid | Trauma Informed Practice, Quality Matters | Court Training, Alan D.P. Brady, Barrister-at-Law | Assisted Decision Making Training, Sage Advocacy.



EPIC Youth Council member Andrea Reilly at the Care Day 2023 launch of Embrace Our Stories exhibition. (Mark Stedman Photography)

A board of directors govern EPIC, with a minimum requirement of five members. The directors sit for a three-year term and may be re-elected for a second, and final, term. The directors serve on the Board on a voluntary basis and are not remunerated. A total of nil was paid to directors by way of re-imbursed expenses in 2023 (€191.70 in 2022).

In 2023, EPIC's Board had a membership of nine. The Board held five formal meetings, in addition to the annual general meeting. Maeve Doyle was appointed as our new Board chair, taking over from Barry O Sullivan, and Aidan Stacey was appointed as vice-chair.

The directors work through a series of sub-committees and formal board meetings. In addition, they are committed to holding an annual strategy review workshop and participate in EPIC public events.

Board Sub-Committees

In 2022, the Board re-structured the sub-committees to align with our five-year Strategic Plan. Each sub-committee has a Terms of Reference approved by the Board, an elected chairperson, and programme of work on which they report to the Board as a whole.

Formal sub-committees:

Strategy and Purpose | Governance and Risk | Finance and Fundraising

Ad-hoc sub-committees (as need arises):

HR | Research Ethics

Board recruitment, induction, and training

Board recruitment is an ongoing process, which involves members of the Governance and Risk Committee in partnership with the chair and vice-chair. New board members are invited to participate in an induction process on a targeted basis to ensure that the skills and experiences of the Board are relevant and strategic.

The induction process includes interviews with the current chair, CEO, and an independent board member. The Governance and Risk Committee also conduct due diligence on new directors. Each director is encouraged to improve their knowledge of EPIC and the sector through formal and informal training. Presentations by EPIC staff or partners are arranged each year to inform the Board on areas of interest.

In line with our Board Handbook, directors are required to complete a conflict of interest declaration when taking up their position on the Board. At the beginning of each board meeting, members are invited to disclose any conflicts of interest which may arise before any agenda items are considered by the Board. Any instances which may arise can be recorded in the minutes. Board members are invited to update this declaration annually.

Two new board members, Bernard Kennedy and Edel O'Connor, were appointed in 2023.

One board member, Deirdre Mullen, retired having served two terms of service.

Everyone at EPIC thank our Board for their continued support, guidance, and commitment to children in care and young care leavers.

Code of Governance

Following the implementation of the Code of Governance, EPIC have embarked on a continuous improvement plan to ensure that ongoing maintenance and improvement of our standards. This plan is formally reviewed by the Board twice a year to review progress and add further work.

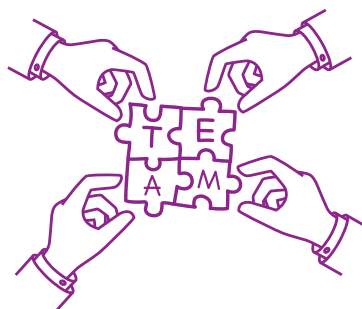


EPIC Board Members (L-R): Conor Brophy, Dr Fiachra O'Suilleabháin, John Feehan,, Aidan Stacey, Barry O'Sullivan, Maeve Doyle, and Val Kerr



09 Board members

28 members of staff



13 new team members



6 lobbying activities filed

New office opened in Castlebar, Mayo



Staff team

- Adrian
- Aoife
- Barry
- Brenda
- Brian
- Caroline N
- Caroline R
- Catherine
- Conor
- Criomhthann
- Edel
- Ellie
- Emma-Louise
- Fiona
- Helen
- Joe
- John
- Jordan
- Kizito
- Marissa
- Michele
- Peter
- Sarah
- Shane
- Shifana
- Tara
- Tekeste
- Therese

Joined in 2023

Moved on in 2023



8 Organisational Codes and Policies



reviewed and updated!

1 Accessible Communications & Information Policy developed

Income and Expenditure

Restricted Income €	Unrestricted Income €
1,568,032	10,563

Income Stream	Amount €
Core funding - Tusla	1,411,525
Other state agency funded projects	134,313
Other funded projects	10,824
Donations	15,217
Rent income and bank interest receivable	6,716

Expenditure	Amount €
Salaries (incl. taxes & temp staff)	1,233,114
Programme costs (incl. funded projects)	79,511
Travel & subsistence	65,606
All other costs	183,529

Audit accounts –
clean audit report
issued.



Other State Agency Project Funding

Income Stream	Amount €
Tusla Education Support Service	76,478
Oberstown Children Detention Campus	24,390
Tusla Legal Services	14,800
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth	17,337
POBAL	1,308

Other Project Funding

Income Stream	Amount €
Children's Rights Alliance Leadership Fund	1,920
Paul Hamlyn Foundation	207
Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission	8,697

Donations

Income Stream	Amount €
Corporate Donations	13,409
Donations from the Public	1,808

General Donations

Income Stream	Amount €
Charitable organisations	1,350
Individual donations	819.33
Corporate donations	4,331.57
Corporate donations - Christmas Appeal	5,962.62

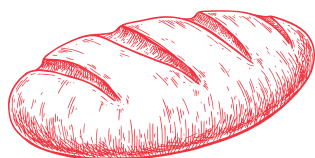
No. of children and young people supported



Christmas Appeal: 92

Small Grants: 17

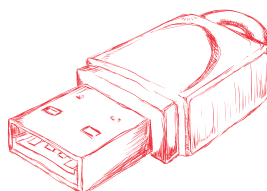
How donations were used



Food/ Poverty/
Toiletries €1,285



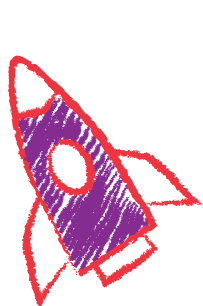
Course fees &
materials €166



Digital €95



Emergencies
€197



Transport
€80



New babies/
Home €175



Medical €590



Christmas Food &
Toy Appeal €4,540

The Brita Waters Legacy Fund

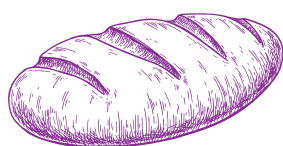
It was a chance meeting and a chat with a young boy who was in Foster Care that played a big part in Brita's decision to become a Social Worker in Child Protection. She was passionate about her work and her many pastimes. She fitted many adventures into her very happy 36 years, surrounded by lots and lots of love from her partner Martin, friends and family, and dedicated Tusla colleagues. She often repeated 'I'm very lucky, Mam'. It was a privilege to have her in our lives, we miss her dearly. With 'Brita on my shoulder' it consoles me that the Brita Legacy can contribute to helping children in care and care leavers.

~ Triona Waters

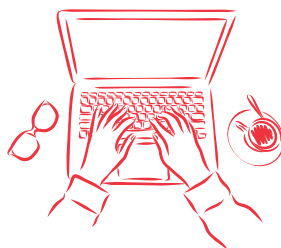
On behalf of Brita's mother Triona, EPIC is honoured to administer the Brita Waters Legacy Fund. Brita's Fund supports children in care and young care leavers through the provision of education and emergency grants. These grants may offset food and fuel poverty, or provide a student with college equipment. You can [contribute to this fund via PayPal](#).

Opening Balance	€10,192.98
Donations in 2023	€4,120.64
Grants Awarded in 2023	€4,348.74
Number of children and young people supported 	19

How donations were used



Food/ Poverty/
Toiletries €398.93



Laptops €2893.95



Emergencies €585



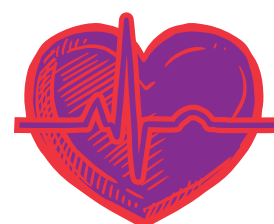
Transport
€180



New babies/
Home €50.86



Course fees &
materials €100



Medical €150



Company Information

Directors

Deirdre Mullen – Fiachra O’Suilleabháin – Barry O’Sullivan – Val Kerr

John Feehan – Maeve Doyle – Michelle O’Connell – Aidan Stacey

Conor Brophy – Bernard Kennedy – Edel O’Connor

Strategy and Purpose Sub-Committee

Conor Brophy (Chair) Fiachra O’Suilleabháin – Barry O’Sullivan – Val Kerr

Governance and Risk Sub-Committee

John Feehan (Chair) – Barry O’Sullivan – Aidan Stacey – Edel O’Connor

Finance and Fundraising Sub-Committee

Fiachra O’Suilleabháin (Chair) – Aidan Stacey – Maeve Doyle – Barry O’Sullivan

Registered Charity Number: 20055080

Company Registration Number: 381973

Registered Office and Principal Addresss

7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7, Ireland

Auditors

Whelan Dowling & Associates

Chartered Accountants & Statutory Auditors, Unit 1+4, Block 1,

Northwood Court, Santry, Dublin 9, Ireland

Bankers

Allied Irish Banks plc.

7/12 Dame Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7
Co Reg no: 381973
Reg Charity no: 20055080
Chairperson: Maeve Doyle

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01 8727661

 [@epicireland](https://twitter.com/epicireland)
 [@epicempoweringpeopleincare](https://www.instagram.com/epicempoweringpeopleincare)
 [@epicireland](https://www.facebook.com/epicireland)
 [EPIC - Empowering People in Care](https://www.youtube.com/EPIC - Empowering People in Care)
 [EPIC Empowering People in Care](https://www.linkedin.com/company/EPIC Empowering People in Care)



empowering people in care