empowering people in care

Pre-Budget Submission 2027

About EPIC

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.

Values

Empowering

Rights-Based

Inclusive

Ambitious

How we work

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.

We are 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 Council is a representative group of care-experienced young people that work with EPIC on specific issues at national level, contributing to our advocacy and engagement with government and media.

Influencing society to ensure better outcomes for care-experienced youth is a priority for us. We work to uphold their rights across national policy, legislation and practice, conducting 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.

All of our 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.

EPIC's Key Asks

Invest in children and families as a priority and increase funding to Tusla by €370 million (26%) in 2027

Ensure every child in residential care has access to **independent advocacy**

- Allocate €850,000 to ensure every child in and transitioning from residential care has access to an independent advocate.

Strengthen **aftercare** supports

- Increase the aftercare allowance to bring it in line with the foster care allowance and index link future increases.
- Introduce an aftercare payment for young people who are not in education or training.
- Ensure that any young person who has been accommodated by Tusla or spent time in care can be provided with an aftercare package or financial support on a needs-assessed basis.
- Allocate funding to ensure that every young person leaving care has an allocated aftercare worker.

Increase funding for **training** and **recruitment**

- Allocate sufficient funding to support the recruitment of 400 frontline staff for Tusla and to increase training and recruitment of additional social workers.

Strengthen **foster care**

- Increase investment to support existing foster carers and encourage new fostering arrangements, including practical and financial supports to meet children's needs.

Special Care capacity

- Allocate funding to support the full implementation of the recommendations in the External Review on Special Care.
- Immediate funding should be allocated for additional onward and high support placements.

Cross-government investment

Prevent care-leaver **homelessness**

- Allocate a ring-fenced €35,000,000 to CAS for Care Leavers to secure and support the management of 100 additional units in 2027.

Support for care-experienced youth with **disabilities**

- Aftercare planning requires reliable funding from the HSE to ensure there are appropriate placements and supports for young people with a disability in care when they turn 18, with funding secured well in advance of this transition.

Improve access to **mental health and therapeutic** supports

- HSE funding should be provided to create a model of care that ensures access to mental health and therapeutic services for care-experienced young people until at least age 25.

Increase direct investment for **care-experienced students**

- Increase direct investment to support care-experienced students in further and higher education through accommodation and wrap-around supports.

Pre-Budget Submission 2027

Meeting the Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

This submission is grounded in evidence gathered through EPIC's direct engagement with children and young people across the country. It reflects the realities of their lived experiences within the care system and the structural barriers they encounter, particularly as they approach adulthood. It also reflects the systemic pressures identified by EPIC advocates working on the front line, including gaps in service provision, delays in accessing supports, and inconsistencies in how policy is implemented in practice. In drawing together this submission EPIC is seeking to provide a rights-based and evidence-informed framework for budgetary decision-making.

Foundational to this is the fact that the State, as corporate parent, has a profound and non-delegable responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in care and young people leaving care. EPIC want to see a shift within Government to reflect the fact that children in care and young people with care-experience are the shared responsibility of the whole of Government. In this regard, we welcome the proposed amendment in the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 which establishes a statutory cross-government and inter-agency committee and places a duty on a range of statutory and State-funded bodies to collaborate in the planning and delivery of child welfare and family support services and to have regard to the best interests of the child.[1] EPIC also welcomes the fact that the duty to co-operate extends beyond collaboration in the planning and delivery of services to children and their families, to include adults who are eligible for aftercare.[2]

A whole-of-government approach to corporate parenting recognises that responsibility for children in care and care-experienced young people extends beyond Tusla and must be shared across all Government departments and State agencies. Children and young people in care rely on a wide range of services - including housing, health, education, disability supports, and social protection - and therefore require coordinated, consistent responses across these systems.

---

[1] The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 is currently before the Dáil at third stage. See in particular sections 10 and 11.

[2] The proposed section 11B of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 provides that a relevant body must cooperate with another relevant body when performing their respective functions in terms of planning and delivery of services to, and activities for, children and their families or young adults for whom Tusla has prepared an aftercare plan.

Effective corporate parenting requires each part of Government to actively consider the needs and best interests of these children and young people in policy design, planning, and service delivery. EPIC emphasises that this responsibility should be embedded in statutory duties and supported through structured inter-agency collaboration, adequate resourcing, and accountability mechanisms. A joined-up, whole-of-government approach is essential to ensure continuity of care, particularly during key transitions such as leaving care, and to deliver improved outcomes that enable children in care and care-experienced young people to thrive.

This responsibility is underpinned by domestic legal obligations and by binding international human rights commitments, including those set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). When the State assumes the role of parent, it must not only provide protection but also ensure that children and young people receive the level of care, stability, opportunity, and support that any reasonable parent would provide. This includes preparing young people for adulthood in a way that reflects their individual needs, rather than imposing rigid, age-based transitions.

Despite significant policy commitments and increased investment in recent years, there remain persistent and systemic gaps in the provision of services for children in care and care-experienced young people. These gaps are most evident in the areas of aftercare, access to safe and appropriate accommodation, workforce capacity within Tusla, and the availability of tailored supports for particularly vulnerable groups, including separated children and young people with disabilities. Critically, many of these gaps emerge at key transition points, particularly when young people turn 18, where supports often fall away at a time of heightened vulnerability.

In 2025, two of the main presenting issues for which children sought advocacy from EPIC were in relation to care placements and aftercare. Cases involving care placements related to a range of issues and often reflected the unavailability of suitable placements for young people, particularly for separated children or children in care with a disability. Cases involving aftercare highlight the barriers for some young people in qualifying for aftercare and the need for flexibility in the system to respond to vulnerable young people in these situations, as well as the value of independent advocacy. Many cases demonstrated the need for better planning and investment in suitable accommodation for young people when they turn 18, and the need for increased investment and planning for suitable placements and access to services for young people in care with a disability when they turn 18.

EPIC is particularly concerned that current systems do not adequately recognise the complexity of the transition from care to adulthood. For many young people, this transition is abrupt, poorly resourced, and driven by administrative thresholds rather than by need. Unlike their peers, many care-experienced young people do not have access to informal family supports to provide financial assistance, housing stability, or emotional guidance during this period. As a result, they are disproportionately vulnerable to poor outcomes, including homelessness and disengagement from education and training. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift towards a model of aftercare that is flexible, adequately resourced, and grounded in the principle of interdependence rather than premature independence.

This submission sets out a series of targeted and evidence-based recommendations for Budget 2027, It also calls for enhanced cross-government coordination, recognising that the needs of this cohort cut across multiple departments and policy areas, including housing, health, education, and social protection.

Central to this submission is the principle that investment in children in care and care-experienced young people is not discretionary, but essential. It is both a legal obligation and a sound social investment that has the potential to deliver long-term benefits for individuals and society.

Budget 2027 represents a critical opportunity for Government to demonstrate its commitment to fulfilling its role as corporate parent, by ensuring that resources are allocated in a way that is responsive to need, grounded in rights, and focused on delivering meaningful and lasting improvements in the lives of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Ireland.

The need for Child Rights Impact Assessments in budgetary decision making

Integrating Child Rights Impact Assessments in the budget process would act as a tool for delivering meaningful improvements in the lives of children by considering the impact of budgetary decisions on children and their rights. This UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that Ireland adopt this approach in both 2016 and 2023. EPIC is encouraged that the Department of Children, Disability and Equality is currently developing a Child Rights and Youth Impact Assessment (CRYIA) toolkit for implementation across Government and government agencies.[3]

The upcoming budget provides an opportunity to demonstrate this commitment in decisions relating to funding allocated to Tusla. This is particularly important with regard to the current position that

[3] Departmental Policies – Tuesday, 8 Apr 2025 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

government departments and agencies have been asked to make cost savings in light of overspend in some areas. It is simply beyond the understanding of EPIC what justification there could be for the inclusion of a lean on Tusla to bridge the budget overspend, particularly considering the well documented impact on children of the under-resourcing of the agency.[4]

Ensure every child in residential care has access to an independent advocate

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is explicit in stating that the child's right to be heard should be facilitated not only in judicial settings but in all matters affecting the child, including in administrative proceedings. Following the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ryan Report), the government committed to all 99 actions contained in the Implementation Plan, including the realisation of the child's right to be heard via independent advocacy.

Many of the critical decisions in relation to the care of a child (such as child in care reviews, care planning and aftercare assessments) happen after a care order has been made and in situations where a Guardian *Ad Litem* (GAL) is not appointed. It is also notable that children who are in voluntary care arrangements are not currently afforded a legal right to a GAL.

Children in care and care-experienced young people are often required to navigate a complex array of systems, processes, and professionals that many adults would find difficult to manage. The children and young people EPIC work with often report feeling powerless, unclear about what is happening in their circumstances, and excluded from decisions fundamental to their wellbeing. An advocate can bring clarity and understanding, ensuring the child remains everyone's focus throughout their care, helping to uphold child-centred practice. In practical terms, the nature of an advocate's role can vary - from providing basic information and supporting a child or young person to know and understand their rights, to practical support, such as working with other professionals to ensure the best outcomes for the child, or a higher level of engagement, where an advocate attends a care review or court proceedings with a child or young person.

All children and young people with care-experience should have the right to independent advocacy, as this fulfils a crucial role in enabling them to communicate their wishes and feelings and play an active role in decision-making regarding key aspects of their lives.[5] At a minimum, EPIC believes

[4] Children's Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2026,* p.180

[5] See further: EPIC, Amplifying Voices: Enshrining the Right to Independent Advocacy for Children in Care and care-experienced Young People in Education (2023)

funding must be provided so that every child in residential care has access to an independent advocate. This should include children accommodated in Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs).

EPIC advocates conduct information sessions for young people in residential care throughout the year, and the majority of the children and young people who avail of EPIC services are in residential care or have aged out of residential care. At the end of December 2025, there were 594 children and young people in residential care in the 247 centres in Ireland.[6] To expand EPIC services to reach each of these children, the doubling of our advocacy team would be necessary.

Provide an allocation of €850,000 to ensure every child in and transitioning from residential care has access to an independent advocate.

Increased investment in Tusla, the Child and Family Agency

A recent report from the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) shows that despite a 94% increase in Tusla's budget in the past 10 years, there is a significant gap between what Tusla submits in their pre-budget estimates and what is allocated in the budget. The report shows that from 2021 to 2026, there was on average a 52% shortfall each year between the estimate submitted by Tusla and the funding allocated.[7] The OCO acknowledges the significant pressures on the system with child protection referrals increasing by 125% in the past 10 years and a shortage of social workers and appropriate placements. The Children's Rights Alliance Report Card 2026 points out the factors that shape demand for Tusla's services, including poverty, homelessness, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, drugs, criminality and exploitation, the impact of new technologies and the global movement of people. The Report Card also points to the extensive waiting lists for disability, mental health and therapeutic support services for children as factors in the increasing pressure on Tusla's services.[8]

Recognising the intersectionality of these issues for care-experienced children and young people, as well as the importance of proactive responses to the needs of families to prevent some children from

---

[6] Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025.* p.13. www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Monthly_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report_Dec_2025.pdf See also Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, *Child and Family Agency- Dáil Debate.* 10 February 2026. www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2026-02-10/945/

[7] Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), *Let's Get it Right, A Rights Based Vision for Children in Care*, March 2026, p.14

[8] Children's Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2026,* p.180

entering care, EPIC is calling for substantial increase in the budget of TUSLA. The sections below set out the areas in which EPIC believes additional funding should be directed to ensure Tusla is adequately resourced to best meet the needs of children in care and young people leaving care.

An increase in funding of €370 million to be allocated to Tusla in Budget 2027.

Investment in aftercare

The State is obligated to facilitate a smooth transition for young people leaving care, offering necessary supports and services to empower them towards independence. Although there is a strong understanding of the important role aftercare plays in supporting young people into adulthood, there has been insufficient investment in the structures and supports needed for young people as they transition from care. Transitions to adulthood are not straightforward - it is important that this period is viewed as a process of moving to interdependence, rather than an abrupt transition to independence which is age-driven and not needs-led.

The alternative care system must be resourced to ensure that support is readily available to navigate this transition over a period appropriate to the needs of the young person. This should include funding to recruit additional aftercare workers, an increase in the aftercare allowance, funding to ensure increased flexibility in relation to eligibility for aftercare supports and more resources to provide aftercare support to separated children when they turn 18.

EPIC continues to see an increase in young people accessing our Advocacy Service who are experiencing homelessness or problems accessing accommodation once they turn 18. This reflects both the impact of the housing crisis on young people with care-experience, and a lack of effective provision of housing by the State for this cohort.

There are also too many young people experiencing barriers in accessing aftercare. Currently, statutory eligibility for aftercare requires that young people must have been in care for at least 12 months before turning 18 to be eligible for aftercare supports. This places many care-leavers, particularly those who have come into care over 17, at a distinct disadvantage, sometimes lacking the supports needed to continue their post school education and leaving them vulnerable to homelessness. However, this statutory minimum requirement does not preclude Tusla from exercising discretion to provide aftercare supports to young people who are less than 12 months in care. Increased investment is needed to ensure that aftercare supports can be provided to all young people with a care background, regardless of the time they have spent in care.

There is a need for increased and sustained investment to support Tusla to meet the current and future needs of separated children. Tusla has responded to a 500% increase in separated children seeking international protection (SCSIPs) and unaccompanied minors, including those affected by the war in Ukraine.[9] EPIC is concerned that the approach to meeting the needs of separated children is not sufficiently resourced, with the vast majority of separated young people accommodated under section 5 of the Child Care Act rather than being taken into care. This has implications for the standards of accommodation and the experience of staff in such accommodation, and also creates a barrier for many of these young people to qualify for aftercare services when they turn 18.

The majority of separated children turn 18 without access to aftercare services or supports. Many of these young people are transferred to IPAS accommodation without any support, some while preparing to complete their leaving certificate exams, often uprooting them from their existing school and supports. For others, where their immigration status to remain in Ireland has already been determined, they have to source their own accommodation, mostly without aftercare supports, or end up accessing homeless accommodation once they turn 18.

These young people need practical supports in terms of secure housing and financial support as they transition to independent living, as well as support to access education and training so that they are given the best chance to thrive. Many of these young people have complex needs and may also require supports while recovering from trauma and displacement.[10]

It is a noted issue within the care system that aftercare is too often neglected and under resourced. When resources are scarce, they are allocated to where the system must respond, which has contributed to aftercare being annually under resourced. From our interactions with Tusla, EPIC understands that until the most recent budget, there was no core funding allocation for aftercare in the budget for the previous decade – instead, funding has been acquired through the dormant account funds for specific aftercare projects. To ensure this is no longer the case, it is vital that a discrete budget line is provided to ensure a ring-fenced budget for aftercare.

---

[9] Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 3

[10] See further research commissioned by EPIC, published in October 2025: Ní Raghallaigh, M., Kelleher, J., and Tedam, P., "Be Strong – There's so many problems waiting": The Experiences of Separated Children Seeking International Protection in Ireland.

Ring-fence the budget allocated for investment in the provision of aftercare.

Increasing the aftercare payment

The aftercare allowance was introduced in 2015 as part of Tusla's commitment to an aftercare service that offers consistent supports to ensure young people leaving care and aftercare reach their full potential in life.[11] To qualify for the aftercare allowance, young people leaving care must meet the eligibility criteria for aftercare and also be engaged in a qualifying education course or training programme.[12] The total number in receipt of an aftercare service at the end of 2025 was 2,985. 1,858 of these young people were availing of education/accredited training at the end of December 2025, and should therefore qualify for the aftercare allowance of €300 per week.

The rate has not been increased since introduced in 2015, despite an increase in the rate of inflation by approximately 27% in the intervening years.[13]

This is also not keeping with the increase to the foster care allowance. EPIC welcomes the increases in the foster care allowance in budgets 2023 and 2024.[14] However, we believe that it is in the best interest of young people aging out of care that the aftercare allowance is aligned to the foster care allowance.

Where a young person remains in education after turning 18, the foster care allowance is discontinued, and the aftercare allowance is then paid to the young person. Usually this is divided between the young person and the foster carer. If the young person remains in the foster placement, which is the favourable scenario, and is continuing in education or training, the payment to the foster carer falls from €425 to €300, which is shared with the care-leaver. When a young person over 18 remains in a foster placement but does not continue with education and training, no aftercare

[11] Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, *Dáil Éireann Debate*, *Aftercare Service Provision,* 22 September 2015. www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2015-09-22/696/

[12] 4254-TUSLA_Finance_Aftercare_v3.pdf

[13] According to the Central Statistics Office the rate of inflation from August 2015 to March 2026 (the most current date available) is 27%. Central Statistics Office, *CPI Inflation Calculator,* CSO Website, 7 May 2026. Interactive Data Visualisations | CSO Ireland

[14] From January 2024 the rates of the foster care allowance increased by €25 per week, up to €350 per week for children aged under 12 and €377 per week for those over 12. This increased further in November 2024, to €400 per week for children under 12 and €425 per week for those over 12. Dáil Éireann Debates, 9 September 2024. www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-09-09/1346/

allowance or foster care allowance is paid. However, the young person may receive a full rate jobseekers allowance payment.

There is a clear rationale for increasing the aftercare rate to €425 to align with the foster care allowance. Just under half of young people leaving care who are engaged in further education and training remain with their foster carers upon turning 18, with 963 continuing to live with their carers in 2024.[15] A policy that discourages foster arrangements for young people leaving care is not in line with the duty of care of the State as 'corporate' parent and ignores the limits of that role in comparison to the social and economic supports that young people can often rely on from immediate family. This duty is particularly important in the context of the current housing and accommodation crisis.

Research commissioned by EPIC has shown how many in the care system are affected by both structural and personal factors that can affect their educational outcomes and whether they progress to further or higher education.[16] This is particularly the case for young people with multiple care placements and school changes which can negatively affect school attendance and engagement. Young people in care with mental health issues and learning difficulties can also have additional challenges in academic and social spheres.

The research highlighted that many young people struggle with the 'double transition' of leaving school and preparing for State exams while also leaving foster/residential care. The care-experienced participants in the study also pointed to the rigid nature of the current support structure. Some felt they would have liked more flexibility to choose their post-school pathways on their own terms rather than being directed to education or training to access the aftercare allowance. Care-leavers deserve the type of flexible support provided by most families to young people exploring independence.

The nature of the transition to adulthood is inherently uncertain, and decisions in relation to education, employment and living arrangements can depend on factors which are subject to change. Young people with care-experience often lack access to the same ongoing practical and emotional support as their peers when dealing with challenges and unexpected outcomes. There is a need for

[15] Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report*, Quarter 4 2025. p.38. www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q4_2025_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report.pdf

[16] Dr. Merike Dermody, *Care to College: An exploratory study on care-experienced students' educational journeys, 2025 (ESRI and EPIC)*

flexibility in relation to eligibility for aftercare supports and financial supports during this uncertain time of transition in their life.

EPIC advocates support many young people leaving care who are not participating in education or training. This can be due to several factors, including numerous placement changes, mental health issues and a lack of supports to attend school, or difficulty coping in a school setting. The rigid nature of eligibility criteria to qualify for the aftercare allowance means that many young people who are not in education and training do not qualify. There were 2,985 young people in receipt of aftercare services at the end of 2025 - of these, 1,127 were not in further education or training and therefore are unlikely to be receiving an aftercare allowance.

While these young people will most likely be eligible for the full jobseekers allowance rate, EPIC is advocating for a separate payment, administered by Tusla, to those young people who meet the eligibility criteria for aftercare supports but are not in education or training. Many of these young people are particularly vulnerable and struggle to maintain employment and accommodation, particularly those who are transitioning from residential placements. A financial payment should be available to these young people on a needs-assessed basis. Depending on the young person's circumstances, such a payment could supplement the jobseekers allowance, other social welfare payment or an apprenticeship payment.

Care-experienced young people who may have challenges in their further educational progression, such as needing to repeat, change courses or take a break from their studies, should not be penalised by losing their aftercare allowance. The fact that the aftercare allowance is limited to those in full-time education also needs to be addressed to ensure the criteria is flexible to young people who are engaging in part-time or blended learning. There are also many young people who do not meet the eligibility criteria for aftercare despite having spent some time in care, particularly if they entered care after the age of 17 or if they were under section 5, under which Tusla provides accommodation to young people out of home but not formally in care. Tusla should be sufficiently resourced to provide an aftercare package to these young people, to include financial support, on a need assessed basis.

Allocate funding to increase the aftercare allowance to bring it in line with the foster care allowance and thereafter, index link future increases to core social welfare increases.

Allocate funding to provide an aftercare payment for young people who are not in education or training. Such a payment could supplement jobsseekers allowance or other payments which care-experienced young people may receive.

Allocate funding to ensure that any young person who has been accommodated by Tusla or spent time in care can be provided with an aftercare package or financial support on a needs-assessed basis.

Increase the number of aftercare workers

An ongoing issue that many care-leavers bring to EPIC is the delay in being allocated an aftercare worker. The driving factor in this is the under-resourcing of the aftercare service and an insufficient number of aftercare workers to meet the demand.

At the end of December 2025, 2,985 young people were in receipt of an aftercare service.[17] However, 22% (668) were awaiting an aftercare plan,[18] an increase of 127 from the end of December 2024. This is despite the fact that there is a statutory entitlement for an aftercare plan to be provided to a qualifying child in care at least six months before the young person turns 18. The number of young people awaiting an aftercare plan is still an issue of great concern and the absence of such supports results in these young people failing to receive the supports to which they are legally entitled.

Over the past two years, EPIC has seen a significant increase in separated children seeking international protection contacting EPIC for advocacy and support, particularly when turning 18. EPIC is concerned that there is often a complete drop-off in supports available to them once they turn 18.

[17] Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 4 2025. p.38.

www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q4_2025_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report.pdf

[18] *Ibid.*

Many young people lack support from a social worker and may not have been allocated an aftercare worker. Many struggle to find accommodation, with some accessing emergency housing without an aftercare worker despite qualifying for aftercare. Others may be offered accommodation but lack additional supports. EPIC understands that there is a total of 8 aftercare workers assigned to the separated children's team in Tusla, and that referrals to aftercare workers are often made very late, with little time before the child turns 18 or after they have already turned 18.

EPIC would like to see a significant increase in the allocation of aftercare workers to take account of pressure points in the system, and to ensure the caseloads of aftercare workers are at recommended levels. This should also include sufficient aftercare workers to ensure that all separated children who have been in Ireland since the age of 16 will receive aftercare supports, in line with current Tulsa policy. Every young person should obtain the aftercare supports they require, based on an assessment of their individual needs as outlined in their aftercare plan.

EPIC is particularly concerned about the continuity of aftercare support for care-experienced young people with disabilities. Every care-experienced young person with a disability should have a designated aftercare worker who meets with them regularly and oversees the implementation of their aftercare plan. EPIC advocates have experienced cases where there is a drop off in aftercare support once a HSE funded place is secured for a care-experienced young person who has turned 18.

An increase in the allocation of aftercare workers would also allow for flexibility in the system so that Tusla can exercise discretion to provide aftercare supports to young people who may not meet the statutory minimum criteria but have been assessed as in need of aftercare supports and services. EPIC sees cases each year where advocacy in relation to these young people, working together with their social worker and aftercare worker, has resulted in Tusla exercising their discretion to allocate aftercare supports which might otherwise have been denied. In other cases, particularly where teams are not well resourced, young people are denied access to aftercare despite clearly demonstrated needs, which may have been avoided if there was less pressure in the system in terms of timely availability of aftercare workers.

Allocate funding to ensure that every young person leaving care has an allocated aftercare worker.

Increased funding for social work training and recruitment

Under national standards, every child in care is entitled to an allocated social worker.[19] The standards specify that the child should be allocated to a social worker as soon as the need for an admission to care is identified and for as long as the child remains in care.[20] The allocated social worker has a number of key duties, including preparing and reviewing a child's care plan, finding an appropriate placement for a child, visiting the child in their placement, supervising their placement, and working with the family to ensure the child's needs are met.[21]

By the end of December 2025, 98% of children in care had an allocated worker, which is a significant improvement from December 2024 when 86% had an allocated worker. However, due to staff shortages, children in care are now increasingly being allocated to other professionals, such as social care workers, overseen by social work management, rather than being allocated to social workers.[22] EPIC is concerned about this trend, particularly in relation to the placement of social care workers in special emergency arrangements where some staff do not have sufficient training or experience to support the needs of the young people in these placements or to deal with challenging behaviour in a trauma-informed way.

Of the 5,879 children in care at the end of 2025, 12% (714) were not allocated to a social worker.[23] Of the 98% allocated a worker in 2025, 89% were allocated to social workers and 11% to another professionals, with 102 children unallocated.[24] There is also significant variation around the country. In some areas, all children in care are allocated to a social worker, whereas in one area, 42% of children were allocated to another professional.[25] As of December 2025, 84% of children in care had an up-to-date care plan, leaving 955 children without one, despite the fact that this is a statutory entitlement.[26]

---

[19] Department of Health and Children, *National Standards for Foster Care* (2003) p.16; and Health Information and Quality Authority, *National Standards for Children's Residential Centres* (2018) p.7.

[20] Department of Health and Children, *National Standards for Foster Care,* 2003, p. 16.

[21] *Ibid*

[22] Children's Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2026*, p.188

[23] Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report.* December 25, p.15.

[24] Tusla, Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report, December 2025, p.27

[25] (Carlow. Kilkenny, South Tipperary). See Children's Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2026*, p.187 and Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report* December 2025, p.15

[26] *Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995* (SI 259/1995) p. 23; *Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995* (SI 260/1995) p. 11; and *Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations 1995* (SI 261/1995) p. 11.

In a recent overview report of governance in children protection and foster care, HIQA also raised concerns that many children did not have an allocated social worker.[27]

EPIC has noted that these difficulties can often culminate in negative outcomes for children awaiting allocation - children may have multiple social workers coming in and out of their lives over a brief period and may experience delayed or reduced attention to their care. This can mean a care plan not being in place or child in care review being delayed. This can impact on the child's education, health, family access, or placement. Important decisions relating to a child may require the approval of a social worker, rather than a social care worker, which can lead to delays in the resolution of an issue for the child or their needs not being met.

At the end of December 2025, Tusla employed 1,731 whole time equivalent social workers and 1,421 whole time equivalent social care workers, representing its highest staffing levels to date, with all funded posts filled.[28] Towards the end of 2025, Tusla indicated that it would need approximately 400 additional frontline staff to meet the presenting demand.[29] Tusla has previously estimated that 500 social workers are needed for recruitment across all sectors in Ireland each year, which is more than double the number of new graduates.[30]

Tusla has undertaken various actions to rectify this situation and to improve its staffing, including converting temporary agency staff to Tusla contracts, offering employment to all final-year social work students, and engaging with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) to increase the number of places on college courses.[31] This has also included the development of a paid social work masters level apprenticeship with University College Cork.[32] Tusla received funding for 36 apprenticeship places in 2024, 77 in 2025 and 100 in 2026.[33]

---

[27] HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care* (2025)

[28] Children's Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2026*, p.181

[29] Joint Committee on Children and Equality Debate, *Child Protection Matters and Special Emergency Accommodation: Discussion.* 27th November 2025. www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_children_and_equality/2025-11-27/3/

[30] Houses of the Oireachtas, Committee on Public Accounts – 'Financial Statements 2022 - Tusla-Child and Family Agency' (29 Feb 2023).

[31] Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Foster Care Issues: Discussion. 28 March 2023.

EPIC would like to see this funding extended to other third level institutions to further increase training and recruitment of social workers. Given that all Tulsa funded posts are filled, EPIC is calling for additional funding for Tusla to ensure they have sufficient resources to recruit and retain the additional 400 frontline staff, with priority given to the recruitment of social workers, in line with the Programme for Government commitment to ensure Tusla is supported in recruiting and retaining vital frontline staff and foster carers.[34]

Allocate sufficient funding to support the recruitment of 400 frontline staff for Tusla and to increase training and recruitment of additional social workers.

Substantially increase investment in special care and onward placements

A special care order may be granted by the High Court where legislative criteria are met to detain a child for a limited time in a secure residential care unit as a therapeutic intervention. EPIC welcomes the External Review of Special Care commissioned by Tusla and published in 2025 and supports the recommendations made. [35] Two major issues within special care, as noted in this report are the insufficient numbers of staff and lack of onward placements.[36] It is clear from court reports in relation to special care applications that these issues are having a significant impact on the children affected.[37] There are currently three special care centres with a capacity of 26 beds. However, only 15 of the beds are currently operational due to difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. Full bed capacity has never been achieved across the three units. The External Review emphasised the need

[32] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (24 May 24) 'Minister O'Donovan announces launch of new educational pathways in social work' (gov.ie).

[33] Joint Committee on Children and Equality Debate, *Child Protection Matters and Special Emergency Accommodation: Discussion.* 27th November 2025. www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_children_and_equality/2025-11-27/3/

[34] Programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future. p. 65. programme-for-government-securing-irelands-future.pdf. p.65.

[35] G. O'Neill, Dr. M. Corbett, M. Fitzgerald & C. O'Callaghan., *Report of the External Review on Special Care,* Tusla, 30 April 2025. www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Report_of_the_External_Review_Group_on_Special_Care.pdf

[36] *Ibid,* p.60

for Tusla and Government to prioritise staffing, pointing out that since 2021, 174 staff have left the service, which is greater than the 168 that Tusla has managed to recruit.[38]

This reduced capacity has resulted in many children waiting for prolonged periods of time for a special care placement, some even up to seven months.[39] The External Review of Special Care noted that special care is no longer operating under its intended purpose as a short-term stabilising intervention and instead has become a *de facto* placement option with some children detained for up to two years.[40]

EPIC operates a visiting advocacy service to special care units, and advocates find that the issue of onward placements is a common theme, with many children wishing to move on from special care unable to do so. The lack of a time frame for this move and the lack of clarity as to where this placement will be is often a source of additional stress for children in special care and advocates find that some of the children who have made progress can begin to regress when no follow-on placement is identified.

The lack of follow-on placement is a persistent issue in the special care list in the High Court, with reports from the Child Law Project detailing examples of children spending excessive amounts in special care as a result. [41] The High Court has raised concerns about special care being used as a holding facility and that children are being institutionalised from their length of time in special care.[42]

The shortage of both residential care and foster care placements is also affecting special care capacity.

---

[37] Dr.M. Corbett & Dr. C. Coulter, Falling Through the Cracks – An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024. Child Law Project. p. 42. See also Kitty Holland, "High Court judge criticises 'disgraceful' lack of special care beds for at-risk children", Irish Times, 13 November 2025

[38] G. O'Neill, Dr. M. Corbett, M. Fitzgerald & C. O'Callaghan., *Report of the External Review on Special Care,* Tusla, 30 April 2025.
www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Report_of_the_External_Review_Group_on_Special_Care.pdf

p.61

[39] *Ibid*, p.1

[40] Ibid

[41] G. O'Neill, Dr. M. Corbett, M. Fitzgerald & C. O'Callaghan., Report of the External Review Group on Special Care, Tusla, 30 April 2025. P.75
www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Report_of_the_External_Review_Group_on_Special_Care.pdf

[42] Overview of Special Care List: Judge stresses need for legislative reform in a number of areas- 2022vol2#51 - Child Law Project

EPIC supports the recommendations of the External Review to reintroduce High Support Units to support children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviour, and to increase residential care capacity in line with the Strategic Plan for Residential Care. The review also highlights the need for provision of different categories of onward placements with additional community-based supports to meet the child's identified needs.[43]

EPIC welcomes the recommendation of a comprehensive model of care for the special care service to be detailed in a single document applicable across the three units, and the broadening of the mix of skills within the staff teams and an inter-agency model of care to include HSE mental health and disability services.[44]

EPIC also supports the recommendation of the External Review to establish a new purpose-built centre for excellence for special care services, including step down units, in one geographical campus supported by a unified multidisciplinary staff team, shared services and research capacity.[45] The Review also recommended that this should be supported by a network of regional high support units, specialist foster carers and community-based supports.[46]

A more ambitious vision and sustained investment is required to address the protracted issues in special care capacity which have persisted for more than a decade. Tusla have sought support from the Department of Children and other Government departments and State agencies with responsibility for addiction and mental health to look at different models of care that might be better value for money.[47]

Despite the introduction of new entry level and promotional level grades for special care workers in late 2024, staffing shortages continue. While 31 new staff were recruited in 2025, this mostly replaced staff exiting and therefore amounted to a net gain of just 7 staff, enabling just 1 additional bed to open.[48] An additional 77 special care workers would be required to open the remaining 11 special care beds.[49]

---

[43] G. O'Neill, Dr. M. Corbett, M. Fitzgerald & C. O'Callaghan., *Report of the External Review on Special Care.* Tusla, 30 April 2025. p.75.

[44] Ibid, p.91

[45] *Ibid*, p.102

[46] *Ibid.* p.72.

[47] Kate Duggan, CEO Tusla, Opening Statement, Oireachtas Joint Committee on Public Accounts, 2nd October 2025

The External Review recommended that the annual budget for special care needs to be examined to ensure the sustainability of funding for special care, including the required skill mix and additional service inputs required. The longer-term vision for alternative care should include implementation the External Review in full, including infrastructure funding for a centre of excellence and recommendations in relation building capacity in residential care and step-down facilities. This should also include a commitment to rebalance the residential care system in favour of public ownership and end the over reliance on private providers.

Budget 2026 provided an additional €6 million in funding to Tusla to increase special care capacity, including new special care staff grades, staff well-being initiatives and additional therapeutic supports, bringing the total budget for special care to €26 million.[50] EPIC welcomes in particular the allocation of €1.3 million to provide an enhanced multi-disciplinary therapeutic service to children on the edge of special care and in special care, and those transitioning from a special care environment.[51]

However, a significant increase in funding is required to open all special care beds and to address the need for high support and onward placements. The need to introduce specialist high support foster and residential placements to provide therapeutic and trauma-informed interventions for children with complex needs has been identified by the External Review of Special Care.[52]

Allocate funding to support the full implementation of recommendations in the External Review on Special Care. Immediate funding should be allocated for additional onward and high support placements.

[48] Children's Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2026,* p.191

[49] *Ibid*

[50] Children's Rights Alliance, *Report Card 2026*, p.191

[51] *Ibid*

[52] As acknowledged by the External Review, this may require the approval of the Minister for Children and may involve legislative, regulatory and policy reform

Increased investment to prevent homelessness among care-leavers

Of the young people that engaged with EPIC's Advocacy Service in 2025, 10% were experiencing homelessness. There is clear and consistent evidence of a strong link between leaving State care and youth homelessness. This is recognised in Ireland's Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025 which identifies care-leavers as a priority group and recognises that they are disproportionately represented in the young homeless population. Data from the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE) shows that leaving care is one of the most common pathways into homelessness for young people aged 18–24, particularly among those entering homelessness for the first time. However, this likely underestimates the true scale of the issue, as young people are only required to record one reason for entering emergency accommodation, meaning care-experience may often be an underlying but unreported factor.[53]

This highlights the urgent need for a continuum of care that extends beyond a young person's time in State care and supports them through the transition to adulthood, particularly in the context of the current housing crisis. Ensuring access to secure accommodation, alongside wrap-around supports such as education, financial assistance, and independent living skills, is essential. Effective prevention will require coordinated action across Government, including prioritising care-leavers for social housing and building on successful models like supported transitional housing, to ensure that no young person leaves care without a stable and secure pathway into adulthood.

In EPIC's view, given the small numbers of those who 'age out' of care at 18 years of age (around five hundred young people annually), the prevention of homelessness amongst care-leavers should be achievable regardless of housing pressure. Not all care-leavers are at risk of homelessness, as some receive further support from foster carers and the majority have access to aftercare services that can assist them to secure stable accommodation. Therefore, the small numbers who are at high risk could have this risk mitigated by robust forward-planning and effective interagency cooperation between Tusla and local authorities, as a part of a young person's aftercare planning while they are still in care. The housing needs of young people who have entered care in the year before turning 18 or are accommodated under section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991, including unaccompanied minors, also need to be considered as this is a particularly vulnerable cohort.

Recently, at the end of Quarter 3 2025, Tusla began recording the number of homeless young people between the ages of 18-22 who are in receipt of an aftercare service. At the end of Q3 2025, of 2,214

[53] Focus Ireland Submission to Consultation on National Policy Framework for Alternative Care, 2025, p.1

young people, 963 – almost half - remained living with their carers. 174 had returned home to their families, 504 were living independently, and 165 were experiencing homeless.[54]

The most up to date figures from Tulsa from the end of March 2026 show a rise in all of the above figures. Of the 2,307 young people in receipt of an aftercare plan, 969 have remained living with their foster parents, 181 have returned home, 528 are living independently, and a total of 181 (8%) of those receiving aftercare are homeless.[55]

In EPIC's experience of working with care-leavers affected by the housing crisis, we can attest to the positive but limited successes of the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS), which is funded by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The CAS for Care-leavers Scheme has allowed Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), Tusla and local authorities to collaborate and acquire numerous properties for care-leavers at risk of homelessness. In the context of the Youth Homelessness Strategy, DCEDIY commissioned a review of the CAS for Care-leavers Scheme. The review stated that the scheme had significant success in reaching its objectives and "should be expanded to meet the levels of projected need for this type of accommodation among young people leaving care".[56]

According to departmental data, 18 housing authorities have not availed of the scheme since 2020 and 13 have not availed of the scheme since the start of 2018.[57] In 2025, the average cost approved was €295,000 for CAS construction and €250,000 for CAS turnkeys[58]. The review of the CAS for Care-Leavers Scheme outlines the difficulties in acquiring properties within the scheme and relying on under-resourced AHBs and local authorities.

EPIC believes that the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and Tusla should work collaboratively to measure the housing need amongst young people leaving care per annum and specific funding should be provided for this. In Budget 2027, the state should aim to acquire 100 additional properties for this scheme, as a first measure.

---

[54] Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 3 2025.* P.41. www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q3_2025_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report.pdf

[55] Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report Quarter 1 2026. www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Q1_2026_Service_Performance___Activity_Report.pdf*

[56] Norris, Palmer, Kelleher, (2022) Preventing Homelessness among Care Leavers: Review of the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) for Care Leavers, UCD (Report commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth).

[57] Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (12 Dec 2023), Written answers. PQ Ref No. 55121/23.

[58] https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-06-10/776/speech/1288/

Allocate a ring-fenced €35,000,000 to CAS for Care Leavers to secure and support the management of 100 additional units in 2027.

Targeted investment in services and appropriate placements for children in care and young people with care-experience with a disability

Children with disabilities in the care of the State are among the most vulnerable children and young people in Ireland. In 2025, 13% of the children and young people that EPIC worked with had a diagnosed additional need or disability.

A recurring issue in EPIC's advocacy work is the delay in aftercare planning for young people with disabilities before they turn 18. Uncertainty about where a young person will live after leaving care places significant additional stress on them during an already challenging transition. Late initiation of planning means services frequently reacts to crises rather than preventing them. Disability case management is limited, and long-term planning is inconsistent.

EPIC advocates also highlight gaps in services and resources. There is insufficient availability of home-share, residential, and respite options for young people approaching 18. Pathways of transition to appropriate adult services are often unclear and access to therapeutic supports can lapse when a child moves placement or county. In some cases, a young person may not be profiled for training and day services on time, resulting in them missing out on a full year of access to services. Another recurring issue is that access to HSE disability services generally requires a moderate disability diagnosis, leaving those with mild intellectual disability without adequate support. Planning and support approaches often fail to consider the intersection between care-experience, disability, and trauma, especially for young people with mild intellectual disability.

Action 44.2 of The Young Ireland National Policy Framework commits to ensuring that children in care can access HSE services, including disability services, in the same way as other children, and an 'in care' status must be an additional vulnerability factor that needs to be considered. Additional funding should be provided to ensure that comprehensive and timely assessments of need are carried out by Tusla and the HSE on admission of every child with a disability entering the care system, with regular reassessments thereafter.

Aftercare planning requires reliable funding from the HSE to ensure that there are appropriate placements and supports for young people with a disability in care when they turn 18, with funding secured well in advance of this transition. Budget 2027 must ensure there is a specific ring-fenced allocation in the HSE budget for this purpose.

Strengthening mental health and therapeutic supports for children in care and care-leavers

Young people leaving care face significant barriers in accessing appropriate mental health and therapeutic supports, an issue that is consistently raised by EPIC's Youth Council. Despite having high levels of trauma exposure, services are often inflexible, time-limited, and difficult to access, particularly as young people transition into adulthood. This creates critical gaps in care, leaving many without the support needed to address complex mental health needs. Young people who access EPIC services often experience long waiting lists and cost barriers when trying to access counselling and therapeutic services.

The transition from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to adult services is frequently poorly coordinated which can leave many care-experienced young people falling between services and losing support during this critical period. Current models often rely on short-term interventions that are insufficient for addressing trauma, as recovery is not linear - children in care and young people ageing out of care may require flexible, ongoing supports that adapt to their readiness and needs. Eligibility criteria for mental health services sometimes excludes young people, even those with self-harming behaviours and complex trauma histories.[59]

HSE funding should be provided to create a model of care that ensures access to mental health and therapeutic services for care-experienced young people until at least age 25, recognising that trauma processing continues into early adulthood.

[59] Tusla, Strategic Plan for Aftercare Services for Young People and Young Adults 2023-2026, p.35

Increase direct investment to support care-experienced students in further and higher education

There is a need for increased investment in accommodation and supports from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) which recognises the unique educational vulnerabilities of students with care-experience and the duty on the State, as corporate parents, to support the educational progression of young people with care-experience. Wrap-around supports to enable successful completion of higher education should be provided to care-leavers, from accommodation (including supported accommodation) to mental health support, to guidance counsellors or mentoring.

Experience of the care system was identified within the socioeconomically disadvantaged priority group in the Higher Education Authority National Access Plan for the first time in 2021. EPIC welcomed this development, as well as the inclusion of care-experienced students as a priority group under the HEAR programme.

A 2025 report commissioned by EPIC and carried out by the ESRI found that care-leavers face multiple challenges on enrolling to third-level education including getting used to a new educational setting, finding accommodation, and managing their finances. The research highlighted that many young people struggle with the 'double transition' of leaving school and preparing for State exams while also leaving foster/residential care.

A research study exploring the experience of higher education of students with care-experience published by the SOAR project and TU Dublin in 2024 found that "*there is a compelling need for consistent targeted financial aid and housing policies that address the unique needs of care-experienced students to ensure equitable access to higher education."* This study also recommended that mental health supports and student counselling should be adequately resourced to meet the needs of care-experienced students.[60]

EPIC acknowledges that progress has been made; it is a welcome development that care-leavers who do not qualify for the aftercare allowance can apply for the Accommodation Assistance Fund. In addition, some care-experienced students benefit from other grants such as the SUSI grant special rate and the 1916 Bursary, but crucially, not every care-experienced student receives these supports.

---

60 Ó Súilleabháin, F., Brennan, R., Dorney, L. and McGovern, S. (2025) Students with care-experience and higher education. Cork: SOAR Project, Access UCC, University College Cork.

Even where students do have supports, with the rising cost of living and scarcity of student accommodation, increased targeted investment in supporting care-experienced students is needed. For care-experienced students who are not in a foster care placement, it is extremely difficult for them to manage sourcing accommodation for each academic year. Many of these young people do not have somewhere to go during the academic holidays which causes additional stress and worry. This can also be an issue for care-experienced young people who need to repeat exams or to take time out, often for mental health reasons. A level of flexibility in relation to the provision of accommodation is required in these circumstances. This is particularly concerning where accommodation is contingent on engagement in education, as young people experiencing mental health challenges may struggle to maintain attendance and, as a result, risk losing their accommodation with nowhere else to go.

Further and higher education providers need to put adequate and targeted supports in place to assist care-experienced young people. At an institutional level, care-experienced young people should be prioritised when allocating accommodation and this accommodation should be available throughout the year for the duration of the course the student is attending.

EPIC is concerned that the majority of separated children do not qualify for the SUSI grant or for aftercare and are therefore faced with insurmountable barriers to continue their education. EPIC continue to see an increasing number of these young people facing huge barriers in relation to accessing accommodation, with some experiencing homelessness. Consideration should be given to removing the 3-year residency requirement for the SUSI grant for young people who had been accommodated by Tusla as separated children.

Expand the Student Accommodation Assistance Fund to include all care-experienced young people including separated children leaving care. The Fund has been a lifeline to many students and should be funded through the exchequer.

Provide funding to prioritise direct access to student accommodation for care-experienced young people where possible.

Increased investment in foster care

EPIC recognises that foster care is the best option for children where out-of-home care is required. While the majority of the children who access EPIC advocacy services are in residential care, advocates also support children in foster care, often in partnership with foster parents, in accessing healthcare, including therapeutic and mental health supports, disability supports, and also in relation to aftercare planning, particularly for separated children and children with a disability.

It is very positive that the high proportion of foster care placements in Ireland compares favourably with care systems internationally. However, the continued decline in the overall percentage of children in foster care - from over 90% to the current 87% - is a cause for concern.

EPIC supports the full implementation of the Foster Care Strategy. It is imperative that all options to support and strengthen existing foster carers, as well as to encourage new fostering arrangements, are considered. Foster parents must be supported in both practical and financial terms to meet the therapeutic, medical, and educational needs of children in their care. In this regard, EPIC supports the pre-budget submission of the Irish Foster Care Association, particularly in relation to index linking the foster care allowance.

Index-link foster care allowance increases to core weekly social welfare increases.

Conclusion

EPIC is encouraged by the recent public consultation on the National Policy Framework for Alternative Care which will set out a whole of government plan for the future of alternative care in Ireland. This will deliver on a commitment made in the Programme for Government 'Securing Ireland's Future' (2025) to develop a national plan on alternative care, to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate alternative care places, and a long-term vision for how the alternative care system will operate into the future. Inviting submissions to the consultation on the framework, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality also stated their ambition that this new policy will improve outcomes for the vulnerable individuals who are known to Tusla.

Any policy framework is only as good as the resources and focus it receives, and the anticipated Alternative Care Policy Framework will require significant long-term investment. However, an underfunded system will not have the flexibility to realise the ambition of the forthcoming strategy. It is important that budget 2027 reflects the stated commitment of the development of the new policy framework through increased investment in Tulsa so that it has the capacity to implement the short-term actions and plan towards areas requiring a longer-term vision.

Central to the success of the new policy framework is the recognition that positive outcomes for children in care are intrinsically linked to quality of the care that they receive and their access to the services that the state provides. This must include proper planning and increased investment across Government departments and agencies to meet the needs of children in care and young people with care-experience and ensure they can thrive. Targeted investment from other key departments and agencies is required to prioritise the needs of children in care and those transitioning from care, particularly in relation to accommodation, education, disability services and aftercare supports. The upcoming budget should take account of additional funding that will be needed for Tusla and other key departments and agencies to begin implementing the forthcoming national policy framework.

This submission has outlined some of the key systemic challenges facing children in care and care-experienced young people, with a series of recommendations to be addressed in Budget 2027. While progress has been made in recent years, significant gaps remain and increased investment is needed. These gaps are most visible at critical transition points, particularly when young people leave care, and continue to undermine the State's ability to fulfil its responsibilities as corporate parent. To meet the challenges in the system, we need to see a shift within Government to ensure that children in care and young people with care-experience are the shared responsibility of the whole of Government.

Budget 2027 must mark a decisive shift from policy commitment to delivery. Children in care and care-experienced young people cannot wait for incremental change. Targeted, sustained investment is needed immediately to deliver the outcomes they are entitled to. Budget 2027 is an opportunity to demonstrate real commitment to corporate parenting - by ensuring that every young person leaving care is supported not just to survive, but to thrive.

7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7
CRO no: 381973
Reg Charity no: 20055080
CHY no: 15742
Chairperson: Conor Brophy

www.epiconline.ie
info@epiconline.ie
01 8727661

@epicireland
@epicempoweringpeopleincare
@epicireland
EPIC - Empowering People in Care

empowering people in care