Department of Education Submission

EPIC is an independent organisation that works with, and on behalf of the 6, 400 children and young people in State Care and young people with care experience. We provide a direct 1:1 National Advocacy Service. We also work in Research and Policy in order to achieve systemic change for young people in the care system both at a policy and practical level.

1. **How well does the education service meet the needs of children and young people?**

1 (a.) What improvements can be made within existing resources?

• Greater understanding and awareness-raising training for professionals (e.g. teachers) on child protection and welfare and child in care issues.

• Greater understanding and awareness-raising about the care system among peers as part of the curriculum on the SPHE module.

• Ensure young people have the basic tools coming out of schools e.g. literacy, numerical skills.

1(b.) What improvements can be made through new provision?

• Prioritisation of young people living in disadvantaged communities–in particular identifying these young people as a particularly vulnerable group, providing them with additional supports where required.

• Development of a holistic approach throughout the educational system to develop life skills, communication skills, confidence and resilience of children from an early age.

• More options for non-traditional education for early school leavers e.g. practical skills.

• Increasing involvement of young people in the entire education process including consultations on their views of the new strategy.

1. **Comment on work currently being undertaken by the Department in your area of interest and/or expertise. (What are we doing well? What could we do better?)**

• Increased working/collaboration on awareness-raising of the care system in the education system. This is a current focus however more needs to be done to ensure teachers are aware of child protection and welfare and care issues.

2. **Are there opportunities (e.g. new areas of work) which the Department should consider when developing the 2016-2018 strategy which would advance the achievement of our mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills?**

• Collating and publishing data on educational outcomes of young people particularly vulnerable cohorts such as children in care.

- Support parents to foster their child's learning.
- Involve young people in all aspects of strategy and its implementation.

• Take an inter-agency approach e.g. joint collaboration/working between the Department of Education and Tusla.

- Prioritisation of young people with care experience
- Prioritisation of young people with care experience in accessing SUSI Grants

3. **How should success on achieving our strategies be measured?**

• Data collection-the development of outcome indicators jointly collated by the Department of Education and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency e.g. number of placement changes for young people over a year, number of young people who are out of mainstream education, number of young people with care experience who have missed school days, number of children with special educational needs and number of young people with care experience participating in secondary and third level education.

• Young people's input into the development process and capturing their experiences of the education system in a qualitative manner.

4. **Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills, in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise.**

EPIC is a National Advocacy Service that provides a 1:1 advocacy service for young people in State Care. Our mission is to empower young people to speak out and be heard on the issues affecting their lives. In 2015, Education was the main presenting issue for young people accessing EPIC's service comprising almost 10% of our Advocacy Cases. The key issues presented by young people in relation to education can be broken down into three main themes

(1.) Access to Education: young people who wanted to continue to attend, or re-engage in a mainstream school (as opposed to attending a special school).

(2.) Change of School and Care Placement: where young people were unhappy in their placement and wanted to change his/her placement and school.

(3.) Financial support for young people accessing third level education e.g. young people needing assistance to apply for their SUSI grant/receive financial support required to further their studies.

These issues will be further explored in the relevant sub-sections of this document.

5. **Any other observations that you would suggest the Department should consider in the formulation of our strategy for education skills 2016-2018?**

- Joint working protocol between the Department of Education and Tusla to identify children at greater risk of poorer educational attainment and school disruption (i.e. by being known to Social Work Services) and more targeted supports and interventions in place.
- Joint working protocol between the Department of Education and Tusla to work together to promote educational participation for young people who experience placement change in order to minimise disruption to schooling.

1. <u>Prioritising Early Years</u>

1(a). Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account.)

The early years are vital in promoting positive lifelong outcomes for our children. EPIC particularly welcomes the commitment to developing a new model of In-Speech and Language Therapy which will involve the collaboration between parents, schools and primary care services, as well as the commitment to providing additional NEPS psychologists to support new intervention strategies to children and staff in the case of critical incidents.

EPIC also feels that there should be more focus on early intervention and child development with more awareness-raising training for professionals such as teachers in pre-schools on child protection and welfare and child in care issues.

1(b.) How should progress on Prioritising Early years be measured?

- Development of indicators on the number of teachers who have completed training in this area.

1(c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

• Prioritising the early years in particular assessment and early identification of children's needs with a view to providing supports and interventions required to maximise better outcomes.

• Promoting Early Parenting Skills with further inclusion and participation of parents in the education system.

2. Tackling Disadvantage

2(a) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

EPIC, as an independent National Advocacy Service provider to children and young people with care experience, would like to highlight these children and young people's exceptional vulnerability/ disadvantage in order to ring fence a protected status for this cohort.

International research has shown that young people with care experience have poorer outcomes compared to their peers in relation to educational attainment and employment. There are a number of barriers to a successful education for children in care including: attitudinal barriers, inadequate care planning, multiple placement moves/placement breakdowns, delays in assessments as a result higher risk of suspension, expulsion, absenteeism and early school leaving. All of these issues need to be addressed.

2(b.) How should progress on Tackling Disadvantaged be measured?

-Tracking the educational participation and outcomes of vulnerable cohorts including children and young people with care experience should be tracked over time. Previous research completed by EPIC *'My Voice has to be Heard: Outcomes for Young People leaving care in North Dublin'* found that only 27/65 (37%) of young people in care had completed their Leaving Certificate in North Dublin.

2(c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

- Joint working protocol between the Department of Education and Tusla to identify children at greater risk of poorer educational attainment and school disruption (by being known to Social Work Services) and more targeted supports and interventions in place.
- Joint working protocol between the Department of Education and Tusla to work together to promote educational participation for young people who experience placement change in order to minimise disruption to schooling.
- Focus education on 'soft' skills e.g. communication skills, confidence building, benefits of education, citizenship and practical skills throughout primary and secondary school.
- Involvement and education of parents in child development and how they can learn and support them with this.
- Focus on capacity-building/life-skills throughout the education system particularly upon the age of transitioning into adulthood.
- EPIC believes that teachers require further training about child protection & welfare and child in care issues-in particular, the impact this can have on the child's ability to learn and on their educational outcomes. It is often the case that teachers are unaware of what it means to be 'in care' and the impact of the care system on children.
- EPIC believes that an education campaign is required in order to educate young people about the care system.
- The impact of placement moves on a child's well-being can be detrimental. EPIC advocates that if a child's placement needs to be changed, then the placement should be available near their area in order to ensure for consistency in schooling.

- Many young people are in Voluntary Care, this means that no Care Order has been sought. EPIC has experienced that this cohort of young people has limited legal protection. EPIC has a number of Advocacy Cases where a young person has lived with foster carers for a number of year however permission for daily activities require consent from birth parents e.g. attending a school trip. This should be highlighted in any awareness-raising programme for teachers.

"I want to go to college and have a good job." Young Person (EPIC consultation, March 2015)

- Education is often perceived by professionals as a secondary consideration with the main aim to find an appropriate placement for a young person. Some young people living in a residential and secure care setting do not have the opportunity to participate in mainstream schooling. These young people often have limited access to subjects on the general curriculum. The impact of this is limiting the full academic and social achievement of these young people. For example in one consultation, one young person described 'not being intellectually challenged.'

- Lack of access to mainstream education and subjects on the curriculum will also have the consequences of limiting access to the third level participation for this cohort of young people. As a result of this, in the long-term, this further limits their educational and employment prospects. EPIC also has experienced that professionals such as teachers often have lower educational aspirations for young people with care experience. This has also been highlighted in the Ombudsman for Children's Report on the 'Educational Experiences of Children in Care' in 2013. Five key recommendations the Ombudsman for Children's Office (2013) (which EPIC echoes) include:

- Gather data on the educational experiences of children in care
- Provide inter-agency opportunities and a public policy commitment to promote educational opportunity for young people in care.
- Develop training materials for key stakeholders including teachers, carers, social workers to help them address educational issues that may arise for children in care.
- Strengthen supports from the care and education systems such as stability and continuity of care particularly at key moments (e.g. State Examinations) in their educational career
- Hear the views of children and their carers to ensure that they are provided with the opportunity to engage in the decision-making process.

Preparation for Leaving Care

- Young people experience uncertainty and anxiety about the future while undertaking State Examinations/ need for supports and Guidance Counselling in place for this cohort.

3. <u>Diversity and Choice for Parents</u>

3(a.) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account.)

EPIC welcomes the Government's commitment to publish the new School Admissions and Excellence Legislation in particular its focus on transparency and admissions for young people in schools.

EPIC has found through our direct individual advocacy work, where a placement breaks down and when another care placement must be found, the young person may be refused admission to the local school. The school may state that the student quota is full to capacity. EPIC welcomes the Educations (Admissions to School) Bill 2013 which obliges schools to publish their admission policies aimed to promote enhanced transparency.

3(b.) How should progress on Diversity and Choice for Parents to be measured?

3 (c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

- Transparency in decision-making regarding school admissions.

4. <u>Promoting Excellence and Innovation in Schools</u>

4(a.) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account.)

EPIC also welcomes the commitment to establish a pool of experts (educators, employers, accountants, IT specialists) to assist in school initiatives.

Furthermore, we welcome the introduction of new technology to bring remote learning into classrooms as part of the digital strategy ensuring students have access to a wide range of subject choices and consistent quality education. We note that this is particularly important for children and young people in care-issue as outlined under section 4(c.).

4(b.) How should progress on Promoting Excellence and Innovation in schools be measured?

4 (c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

One of the key issues identified by young people living in a residential care setting was their lack of access to technology in particular having no mobile phones and limited access to the internet. In some cases, young people in residential care do not have access to technology such as access to computers. This limits the young person's social and educational development. On a par to their peers, with adult supervision, all young people should have access to internet, computers and mobile phones.

EPIC believes a balance needs to be struck between a young person's safety versus the young person's participation to have access to the internet in a supervised manner. Young people should not be penalised as a result of their Care Status.

Teachers should also have training to support all young people to safely access and use technology and social media.

5. Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students

5(a.) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account.)

EPIC welcomes the Government's approach to keep a focus on literacy and maths but it is well-received that there will be a focus on new subjects such as entrepreneurial education and mental health awareness. We also particularly welcome the evaluation of transitional supports available to young people at all levels of education which are highly important particularly for young people leaving care who experience high levels of anxiety and distress at this time.

5(b.) How should progress on Promoting Creativity and Entrepreneurial Capacity in Students be measured?

- Monitoring and evaluating priority actions and outcomes

5 (c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

• EPIC believes that a new subject on the curriculum should focus on capacity building/life-skills programme so that every child/young person has resilience and knowledge to live independently as they transition into adulthood.

• Furthermore an educational programme which builds young people's awareness e.g. that the young person is risk-aware, information is available to young people, that a range of options for future training, education and career development are available. This would include looking at practical, financial skills, use of technology and robust career guidance.

6. Making Better Use of Educational Assets within Communities

6(a.) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account.)

EPIC welcomes acknowledgement that school buildings could be utilised out of hours including better utilisation of information technology. Afterschool care, homework clubs and other community activities are all significant in young people's participation in their communities.

6(b.) How should progress on Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities be measured?

- Monitoring and evaluating priority actions and outcomes

6(c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

Bringing together people within communities with practical, academic and professional skills to benefit children and young people e.g. setting up computers, book clubs. Retired professionals such as career guidance teachers, sportspeople, business people acting as mentors for young people.

7. Special Needs Education

7(a.) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account).

It is welcome that the government will examine the adequacy of current special education access and funding provision.

7(b.) How should progress on Special Needs Education be measured?

- Monitoring and evaluating priority actions and outcomes

7 (c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in the area?

- Assessment of every child at an early age and identification of need
- Increase number of Special Needs Teachers
- Implementation of ESPEN Act
- Equity of Services for children with special needs
- Access to specialist education services with a range of options e.g. Autism services.
- Development of practical lifelong skills to enable young people to live independently e.g. focus on independence, resilience, relationships, practical skills such as budgeting and cooking.

8. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

8 (a.) Comment on the approach contained in the Programme for a Partnership Government (are we capturing the essential issues, are there additional matters we should take into account.)

EPIC welcomes the implementation of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* and also the increase in number of flexible courses available. We also welcome the proposed examination of the efficiency and operation of SUSI including the potential of providing SUSI liaison in each region. This we feel is required from our experience of working with young people with care experience.

8 (b.) How should progress on Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future be measured?

- Findings from a European Project, YIPPEE, found that only 8% of young people with a care history had access to higher education.
- Monitoring and evaluating priority actions and outcomes

8 (c.) What would you consider to be the priority actions and outcomes in this area?

- All young people leaving care should be entitled to the full SUSI Grant. These young people should be given priority access to third level grants as these young people have little or no familial supports.
- Application for SUSI Grants for young people with care experience need to be made on time to ensure that young people receive their payment when they take their college space.
- Better communication links with the Department of Education, SUSI and Tusla.
- There is currently a loophole in legislation which means that means young people with 'leave to remain' status are not eligible for grants. This anomaly needs to be addressed.
- Focus on developing a holistic approach to education, flexibility, practicality and skills development rather than on academic qualifications. Young people often have a range of highly developed skills but are not able to get the necessary academic qualifications e.g. computer skills, music, sports.