



A Survey of Children's Residential Care Services in Ireland during the Covid-19 crisis

A survey undertaken to assess the impact of COVID19 on staff and children in residential care. The survey sought to document the challenges arising for children and staff as a result of the COVID19 restrictions, the impact on work practices, the need for increased or additional support and any innovative practices emerging as a result of the crisis

COVID 19 – A moment in time for children's residential care services in Ireland

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Introduction

At the start of April 2020, during the lockdown due to Covid-19 EPIC decided that we would endeavour to contact all residential centres in the country. There were many reasons for undertaking this piece of work.

Firstly, to reach out to as many staff and young people to let them know that they were in our thoughts and to offer any immediate support that they made need.

Secondly, to examine what difficulties the young people may be experiencing under new conditions.

Thirdly, to determine what issues were presenting for staff and management.

Fourthly, to ascertain if work practices had changed within the home and what if any new initiatives were brought forward.

Penultimately, to establish if extra supports were required for the unit.

Finally, the survey would capture a moment in time of when everyone was trying to cope with a pandemic. (See Appendix A for full Questionnaire).

A major difficulty in undertaking such research was to try and locate all the centres. Residential care can be divided into three sectors in Ireland.

Firstly, there are the statutory run units that are fully run by Tusla (The Child and Family Agency). The second cohort and with the highest number of premises are those that are privately run. Finally, there are a small number of voluntary homes mainly run by religious orders. Unfortunately, there is no national database where all of these are recorded.

To try and locate the private residential centres, it was necessary to track the inspection reports of the service providers. Once a list of the providers had been established, it was then necessary to contact these services on an individual basis to locate their full list of facilities. This was a lengthy task and necessitated just under a full week's work.

The search concluded with a list of one hundred and seven private residential centres and twenty-nine voluntary run homes.

There are thirty-one different private providers and sixteen different voluntaries organisations involved in the care of children in residential homes.

Obtaining information on the statutory run homes was easier to find, and thanks to the residential services in Tusla, I was provided with their full list of thirty-eight homes.

All the centres were then contacted directly by EPIC advocates to explain the reasoning of the surveys and then the questionnaires were e-mailed to the centre managers.

Limitations of the Survey

Due to this being just a snapshot in time, it is important that the surveys are sent, and the information collated quickly. This is necessary so as not to miss the information that is very current and hopefully for a short period of time. Because of this fact and the increased workload on staff and managers the returns at present stand at 27%.

Another limitation is that due to ethical and legal constraints it was not possible to talk directly with the children and young people in the homes. This would have been the ideal scenario, and according to Tusla figures at the end of 2019 there were four hundred and nine children in residential care in the State.

Survey Findings.

The first question was the main item in the survey and was separated into seven sections.

1. What are the main difficulties that your young people are experiencing at this time?

- Feelings of isolation? The vast majority of units said that this was not an issue. This seems to have been addressed using Facetime, Skype etc. Also, more outdoor activities are being organised, starting a vegetable garden, bird feeders and more outdoor games.

However, it was reported by one unit that the isolation appeared to retraumatise and trigger stressful events for their young people. They also said that they were scared to leave the house, and that their independence has been taken away.

- Family access curtailed? Most of the centres ticked this box on the survey, but very other information was given. However, the issue was raised by one centre where two of the younger residents were not on social media and this led to difficulties and another centre noted that the parents did not have smart phones which led to complications. Another stated that one of their young people were experiencing loss due to a lack of family contact.
- Out of School: Again, this was an issue that was present in all the units. One unit reported that this was the biggest issue they faced, as the young people did not want to engage in the schoolwork that was set for them.

It was also noted by another home that the young people missed the routine and the structure of the school day, but that the school had been very supportive.

Another centre noted worryingly that a young person's school placement had been delayed due to Covid-19 and his start date put back until September.

However, the situation was presented differently in another unit as they said that the young people were more relaxed now, as they usually found school very stressful.

Finally, the last work on schools, one centre noted "No issues here. The young people are delighted!"

- Social Distancing: Once again, the majority of units marked this as an issue without expanding on it. However, comments of three units need to be noted here.

Firstly, one unit noted that it was more difficult for the younger residents. Their seven- and twelve-year olds have additional needs and one of them especially loves hugs. Changes to staff rota (3 teams of 3 every 3 days) and key working sessions have helped.

Another centre said that this “has left our young people feeling even more detached from the community they live in. The young people have been left feeling scared after being shouted at by members of the public while out for a walk with members of the care team for being in a group of but maintaining social distance rules.”

Finally, one centre reported that the young people are not managing this and going out with their friends in groups. They are also not respecting this with staff.

- Strained Relationships with Other Residents (Cabin Fever): Almost 100% of the surveys reported that there are no issues here and that all young people are really making the effort to get on. In fact, it has been said that as most of the young people in the centre are friends that bonds have been strengthened. However, one of two, and only a few noted a difficulty as all residents are now in the house at the same time.
- Strained Relationships with Staff: The results of this are very similar to the above. Very little if any negativity.
- Other: “Boredom, leading to drug use.”

“Children lost services such as contact with the clinical team.”

“Restrictions impacting on the volume and range of activities the young people can engage in within the surrounding area such as day trips to the beach, hiking etc.”

“Anxiety about Covid-19 and how it is affecting the children and their worry about their families.”

“Concern of contracting Covid-19.”

“Struggling with college work and assignments without the hands-on support from lecturers.”

“Adapting to new agency staff coming in.”

2. What are the main difficulties that staff are experiencing?

- The main concern was universal across all units. The fear of bringing Covid-19 into the house and the implications that it would have for everyone.
- Also, the staff finding the need to be creative to pass the time and encourage the young people to participate.
- Another stressful area for staff, is the helping with and monitoring of schoolwork. As was reported on many of the questionnaire, trying to keep the young people motivated to continue with their work is difficult and care staff are not schoolteachers.
- Changes in the rota so that staff are working longer hours to ensure that there are less people in the houses at any one time. This may lead to fatigue and burnout.
- “My sense is anxiety over the long-term prospects in relation to the general situation. The not knowing and lack of clarity and when it will end, has created a vacuum within which all sorts of negative scenarios plays out for many people.”
- Resident had been an inpatient in a mental health service but was on access when the lockdown occurred. Mental health service refused him entry back due to him coughing and demanded that he was tested for Covid-19. Unfortunately, although referral for testing on 18th March he was not test until 29th March and no results until 7th April. Thankfully, results were negative,

but he was refused back to the mental health facility despite presenting as extremely unwell. Without him being assessed, his medication has been increased and officially discharged him from the service on 25th March. He has not seen anyone from mental health services and staff are trying to look after him in very difficult circumstances.

3. Have your work practices changed, and have you introduced any new initiatives into the home?

- Across all residential units there is an increase in hygiene standards, the numbers of staff on shift has also decreased throughout. Obviously, all are following the guidelines issued by the HSE strictly. Many of the managers are either continuously working from home or doing so on a part-time basis.
- Many houses have reported that goals and expectations for young people have been lower at this time, to ensure less stress and difficulties for everyone.
- Many new items have been purchased by the units to help with boredom and help with the lockdown. These include bicycles, art supplies, Netflix and Disney channels, baking supplies, board games and gym equipment. Many other inventive activities have also been introduced, talent contest, bingo night and sports events.

4. What extra supports would help you during this time?

- Many of the centres reported that they are happy with the current supports that they are getting. However, an issue for some of them was the need for additional PPE, specifically facemasks, goggles, and gowns. There was also a general call for more communication with the young people and to keep them informed about their own situation. Other units also asked for more supports both for staff and young people in relation to their mental health.

There was also a small number of queries for clarification from Tusla regarding arranging access with parents of children. In one survey, there was confusion over social work advice as their residents have been given different information and were implementing different guidelines.

Another unit questioned the length of time that a young person would have to stay in isolation as they felt that this was unrealistic in a residential centre.

5. Any other comments or suggestion?

There were very few comments or suggestions left by managers on the survey. However, what was mentioned was that the commitment of staff is unquestioned.

An issue that has been raised though, was young people in care's access to social media and the difficulty that this causes, leading to further feelings of isolation. This may be done for many reasons, safety, GDPR, or lack of electronic devices with that child. Possibly something that needs to be examined in the future.

Another suggestion which also requires awareness raising is that young people's mental health needs to be prioritised and even more so those in care.

On a lighter note, one of the private operators suggested that there should be an art competition throughout their company with the winning entry displayed in their head office.

On a similar happy note, the final suggestion is that “there should be a national/regional event for all young people in care to attend, full day of activities to reward them for managing so well in such a difficult time.”

Conclusions:

Firstly, to reiterate that this survey is just a snapshot in time and was not only created to find the information above, but also to reach out to all of the centres to try and lessen their possible feelings of isolation.

Regarding the questions that were asked the main issues were around the fear of staff of them bringing Covid-19 into the home.

The issue of lack of family access was noted but not discussed in detail, so possibly something that needs further investigation.

The issue of being out of school has impacted on many levels. The routine and structure of going to school is impacting on the units as all the children are now there together. The other issue for staff is trying to motivate the young people to still maintain their schoolwork and it was said repeatedly in the surveys that care staff are not schoolteachers.

Positively, young people are understanding of the current restrictions and as difficult as they are, most centres are reporting compliance and actual positive relationships with their staff.

However, there are major concerns for staff and management at present. Due to rotas being changed to ensure lower ratio of staff working, there is a fear of burn out. Also, staff have less opportunity to relax as their only option after leaving work is going home.

Most centres have been incredibly creative in ensuring that more resources have been put in place to keep their young people from getting bored. These range from gym equipment to bingo nights. All must be applauded for their ingenuity and commended for spending extra resources in this way.

Overall, despite all the restrictions that have been put in place, the residential services are doing remarkably well. Management, staff, and the young people are much-admired at this time and there must be assurances that the supports mentioned must be maintained and increased if restrictions remain.

I'd like to thank all those who took the time to take our calls, send back the surveys and continue to look after the children in their care

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Appendix A

Survey of Residential Services During the Covid-19 Restrictions

EPIC Empowering People In Care is conducting a survey of all residential centres during the current Covid-19 outbreak to capture how they are doing and what if any further resources or help they feel they need.

With the consent of your centre, we will collate all the information gathered and pass a final report of the survey to Tusla and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and other appropriate services, to assist in developing awareness of the issues arising for residential care centres as a result of the COVID 19 crisis.

Name of Centre

Contact Details:

Name of Manager:

Statutory:

Private:

Voluntary:

1. How many residents are in your house and what is the gender balance?

2. What are the main difficulties that your young people are experiencing during this time?
 - Feelings of isolation.

 - Family access curtailed.

 - Out of school

 - Social distancing

 - Strained relationships with other residents (cabin fever)

 - Strained relationships with staff

 - Other

2. What are the main difficulties that staff are experiencing?

3. Have your work practices changed, and have you introduced any new initiatives into the home?

4. What extra supports would help you during this time?

6. Any other comments or suggestions?

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