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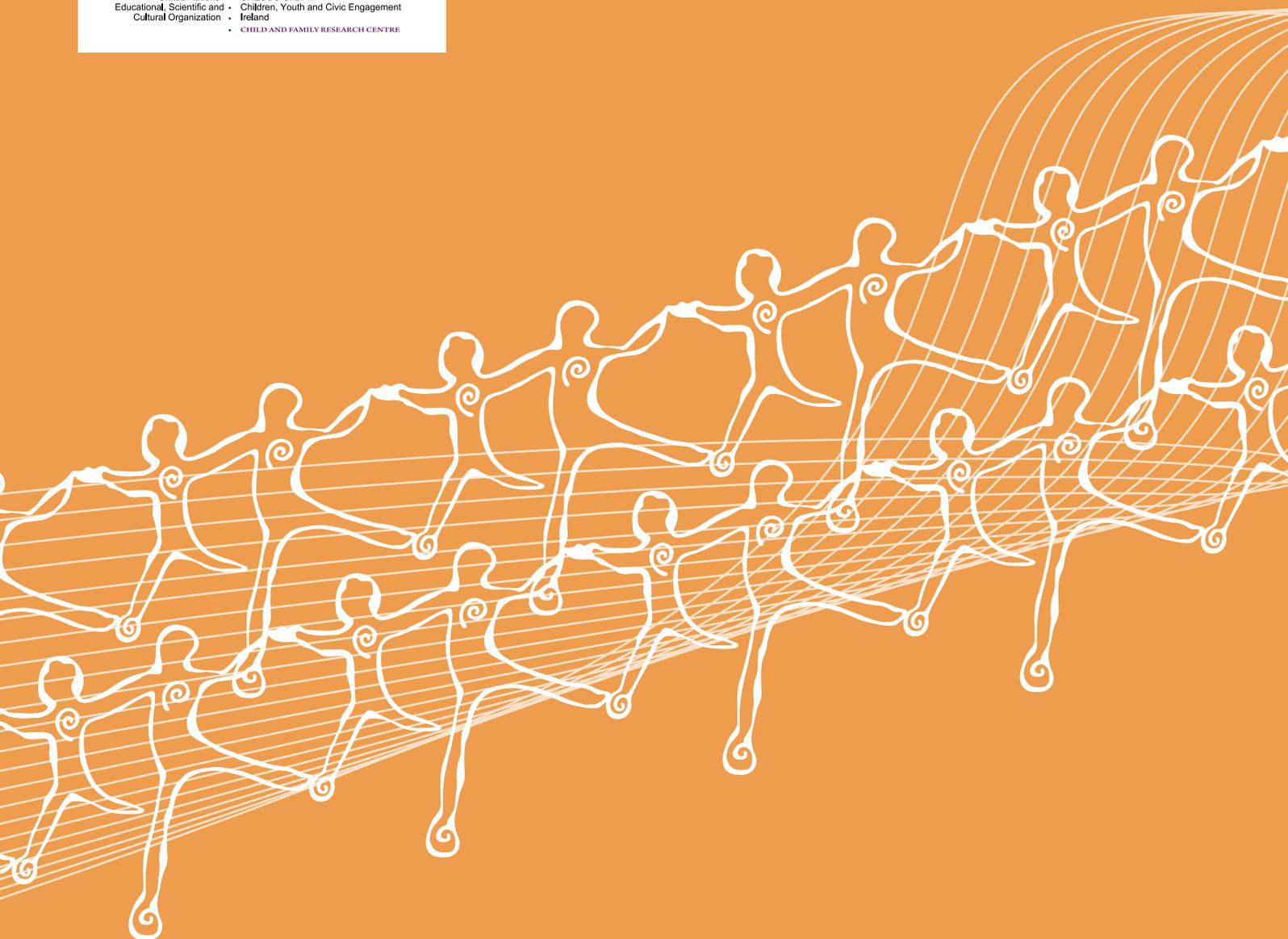
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CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE



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# Collective participation for children in care: **A formative evaluation of the Tusla / EPIC Foster Care Action Groups**

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# Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support



The research and evaluation team at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway, provides research, evaluation, and technical support to Tusla's Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS). This is a new programme of action undertaken by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, as part of its National Service Delivery Framework. It seeks to transform child and family services in Ireland by embedding prevention and early intervention into the culture and operations of Tusla. The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre's work focuses on research and evaluation of the implementation and the outcomes of Tusla's Development and Mainstreaming Programme and is underpinned by the overarching research question:

*Is the organisational culture and practice at Tusla and its services integrated, preventative, evidence-informed, and inclusive of children and parents, and if so, is this contributing to improved outcomes for children and their families?*

The research and evaluation study is underpinned by the Work Package approach to deliver a comprehensive suite of research and evaluation activities involving sub-studies of the main areas in the Tusla Development and Mainstreaming Programme. The work packages are: Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks, Children's Participation, Parenting Support and Parental Participation, Public Awareness, and Commissioning.

**This publication is part of the Children's Participation Work Package.**

## About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the National University of Ireland. It was founded in 2007, with support from The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Health Service Executive, and is based in the School of Political Science and Sociology. The mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services, and practices that improve the lives of children, youth, and families through research, education, and service development. The UCFRC has an extensive network of relationships and research collaborations internationally and is widely recognised for its core expertise in the areas of Family Support and Youth Development.

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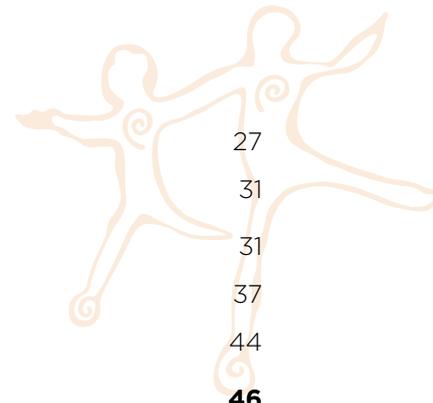
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# Glossary of Terms

**Tusla:** The Child and Family Agency

**EPIC:** Empowering People in Care



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# 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Children's participation has been defined as 'the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly' (DCYA, 2015: 20). Children's participation can relate to decision-making about their own lives and circumstances (individual participation) or to the issues affecting a group of children and young people (collective participation). This study focuses on collective participation, which is defined by Seim and Slettebø (2011: 498) as 'the goal of improving services for everyone in the same situation'.

While children's participation is important in all areas of their lives, the need for effective structures and processes to support the participation of children in care has been well documented in Ireland and internationally. A number of reports spanning decades, from the Kennedy Report in 1969 to the more recent Ryan Report (2009), highlighted the serious failings of the state to protect children as a consequence of not listening to them (Martin et al et al., 2015). Research has shown that many children and young people in care feel that they do not have a say in decisions that affect them, and that they have insufficient information and support to understand and cope with what can be a very stressful experience (Pölkki et al., 2012; McEvoy & Smith, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2010; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Cashmore, 2002). Furthermore, research has shown that the experience of the care process itself, along with factors arising from prior life experiences, may lead to poor outcomes in adulthood, such as poor mental health, lower educational attainment, and welfare dependency (Moran et al., 2017; Daley, 2012; Mullan et al., 2007; Munro, 2001; Stein et al., 2000). For these reasons, to develop an effective child protection system and to improve the lives of children and young people in care, it is considered necessary to listen to and respond to the views of children in care (Moran et al., 2017; Shannon, 2016; Daley, 2012; Mullan et al., 2007; Munro, 2001; Stein et al., 2000).

In the Irish context, a requirement to support the participation of children and young people in care is upheld by legislation, including the Child Care Act (1991), the Child and Family Agency Act (2013), and the Children First Act (2015), along with policy documents such as 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' (2014) and the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015).

Tusla, Ireland's Child and Family Agency, has a statutory responsibility for children and young people in care and must ensure that the participative requirements of legislation and policy are upheld. Tusla's founding legislation, the Child and Family Agency Act (2013), states that in planning and reviewing the provision of services, the views of children and young people will be ascertained and given due weight. Tusla is also currently developing policy on children and young people's participation to enhance practice in this area.

In line with its legislative and policy-based obligations, the Child and Family Agency is currently implementing a comprehensive programme of action related to participation. As part of this programme, Tusla has initiated a model of collective participation for children in care in partnership with an independent advocacy organisation for children and young people in care, EPIC (Empowering People in Care). This initiative involves the establishment of regional groups or fora for children and young people in care, known as the Tusla and EPIC Fora. The initiative aims to improve service delivery and prompt



policy development by ensuring that the views and experiences of children and young people in care are articulated to Tusla management. In line with the clear need to improve future outcomes for children and young people in care, an additional aim of the fora is to promote the social and emotional well-being of young people in care through participation in group processes.

The overall aim of this study is to explore the extent to which the Foster Care Action Groups established by Tusla, in partnership with EPIC, facilitate the collective participation of children and young people in care, and influence Tusla policy and practice. The study's design and analysis are based on a rights-based framework, namely Lundy's (2007) conceptual model of participation, derived from Article 12 of the UNCRC (which is elaborated below). The study methodology included focus groups with young people in five fora areas, interviews with adult stakeholders, and documentary analysis.

The remainder of this introductory section provides further detail on the service, legislative, and policy context, including how participation is conceptualised and understood by Tusla. This is followed by a brief review of the international research literature in relation to collection participation initiatives for children and young people in care, to allow for reflection on learning in this area relevant to this evaluation.

## 1.2 Service Context

At the end of July 2018, there were 6,115 children in the care of Tusla, 92% of whom were in a foster care arrangement (27% placed with extended family), 6% in residential units, and 2% in other arrangements (Tusla, 2018). Outlined in Tusla's vision for participatory practice is the idea that the participation of young people is embedded in the organisational culture and practice of the agency, and that every time a decision is made that affects a child directly, or young people collectively, their views are taken into consideration during the decision-making processes (Tusla, 2015, Briefing Presentation). This is a considerable number of children and young people who are rights bearers with regard to participation opportunities as codified in law and outlined with specific requirements in policy.

## 1.3 Legal and Policy Frameworks

Since the legislation and policies that define and promote participation are key to effective collective participation, it is worth noting that in the Irish context a particularly well-developed legislative framework has been developed. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and national legislation in Ireland uphold the right of children to have a say in matters affecting them. Since its ratification in 1992, the UNCRC (1989) has prompted the development of a range of policy provisions outlining the principles and practices that governmental bodies and organisations that undertake work with children in Ireland must implement. Considerable progress has been made in developing a policy and practice framework to increase young people's participation in local communities, the education system, the health and social services, and the court and legal systems.

As noted earlier, it is a requirement in Tusla's founding legislation, the Child and Family Agency Act (2013, Section 5.1), that in planning and reviewing the provision of services, the views of children and young people will be ascertained. This requirement reflects an ongoing commitment by state agencies to enable the achievement of the participation rights of children and young people.

The participatory practice enabled by this act is influenced by the policy document the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation (DCYA, 2015), which outlines how this is to be achieved. Participation rights in this policy document are conceptualised using the Lundy model (2007), a checklist for participatory practice, which has been adopted by Tusla as a framework for practice.

The Lundy model provides a rights-based framework that is useful for both ensuring the effectiveness of participatory practice and evaluating its implementation. It contains a four-point checklist that allows

for better implementation of participatory practice due to a well-developed interpretation of Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989):

*1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

*2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (Lundy, 2007)*



The first requirement of the Lundy model checklist is **Space**, which means that children must be given an opportunity to express a view. The second requirement is **Voice**, which articulates the need that children have for information, facilitation, and guidance in expressing their views. Both elements are closely linked to the first part of Article 12 and there is significant overlap between them.

In relation to the articulation of practice requirements, related to the second part of Article 12 as outlined by Lundy (2007), the third requirement is **Audience**: that the views of children must be listened to by someone with the capacity to make decisions. The fourth is **Influence**: that the view must be acted upon if appropriate. Furthermore, to ensure that the views of the child are given due weight, feedback on the decision regarding their input must be given to them as part of the participatory process (Lundy, 2007). These requirements, which impact on the level of participation achieved, are all interrelated. It is argued that they must all be realised in practice if the legal obligation to ensure the appropriate implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) is to be achieved along with transformative participation (Lundy, 2007).



This model allows for further critical reflection on the attainment of participation rights when considered in light of other articles of the UNCRC that promote participation, in particular Article 2 (*non-discrimination*); Article 3 (*best interests*); Article 5 (right to guidance); Article 13 (*right to seek, receive, and impart information*); and Article 19 (*protection from abuse*). Together these provisions provide a framework for reflection on the anticipated complexity and tensions associated with the collective participation of children and young people in care in the context of child protection and welfare practice (Lundy, 2007).

## 1.4 The Collective Participation of Children in Care: Research Findings

The collective participation of children and young people in care has been used as a model to inform the development of policy and practice in other jurisdictions. Collective participation opportunities have been provided in a variety of formats, for example through focus groups, consultation tours, young people's councils, and research groups (Larkins et al., 2014; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Seim & Slettebø, 2011). These initiatives have demonstrated varied levels of success, ranging from input into service development and practice-based education at a local level, to awareness-raising at a policy level, and the development of skills and self-efficacy for the young participants (Larkins et al., 2014; Thomas & Percy Smith, 2012).

However, it is argued that collective participation rarely has a transformative impact on service development at policy-level decision-making. Thomas and Percy-Smith (2012) suggest that formal collective participation initiatives for children in Alternative Care in England are more likely to lead to changes in young people themselves than in policy. Challenges have been identified which relate to the structure, scope, and operation of some collective participation opportunities, which were found to reflect top-down adult priorities and agendas, and therefore impacted negatively on process and outcomes (Perry-Hazan, 2016; Larkins et al., 2014; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Seim & Slettebø, 2011).

A review of the literature on participation suggests that there are a number of factors that may enable or constrain the effective collective participation of children and young people in care. The messages from children and adults in literature show that there are *policy-level*, *organisational*, *interactional*, *individual*, and *situational* prerequisites for the participation of children in care (Pölkki et al., 2012). Horwath et al (2011) outlines three important supportive factors that are of utility in considering the effectiveness of collective mechanisms for participation for young people in care. The first is the context, which includes laws and policies on participation and rights, including the manner in which they are interpreted. The second supportive factor concerns the *facilitators*, who must be skilled and have access to the relevant knowledge and attributes. The third is the *group dynamics* in which task and process will influence how the group operates, as will existing relationships between group members. These factors provide a useful frame for considering the effectiveness of collective participation in influencing the service and policy development of an organisation.

This study will consider the situational factors, the circumstances in which participation is encouraged, and the relational factors, that is, the influence of various actors in interaction with each other, embedded in a policy-driven organisational context, to consider collective participation for young people in care.

## **Relational Factors**

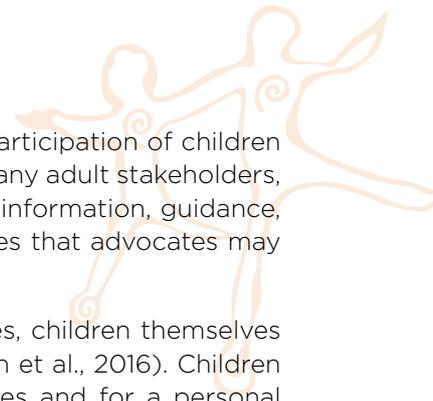
The relational dimension of participation is an important consideration given the position of dependency in which young service users find themselves in relation to those practitioners and professionals who structure and support their participation opportunities (Cossar et al., 2016). A key learning from literature is that the participation of children and young people is embedded in relational processes where the context and relationships of power can shape the voices of children (Nybell, 2013). This requires the development of safe environments in which children can build and demonstrate capacities through supportive relationships designed to enhance their participation and encourage the expression of their views (Lundy et al., 2011).

Young people in care are primarily supported in this model of participatory practice by social work practitioners and other personnel from the Child and Family Agency. Having facilitators with the knowledge, skills, and attributes necessary to promote participation is considered critical if this collective model of participation is to be effective (Cashmore, 2002). Social work practitioners are, by nature of their role, specialists with training equipping them to work with vulnerable young people and knowledge of the legal and policy-level requirements of practice. Children, young people, and adults alike need to understand the current decision-making processes in their organisation so that they can recognise where change is possible and assist children and young people to understand this (Wright et al., 2006). Therefore, it is argued that the engagement of social workers with the model of collective participation is crucial.

However, the interpretation of participation by the facilitators has been seen to affect participatory practice, highlighting the importance of paying attention to relational factors. The participation rights of the child are often seen to be in tension with the principles of protection and the best interest of the child that are of priority to social work practitioners. It is argued that in practice that is driven by a welfare ethos, participation rights are often put aside to ensure the welfare of the child or young person (Vis et al., 2012). Despite evidence of beneficial outcomes, in protectionist practice, children and young people often do not get to participate in decision-making, as it is deemed too stressful or beyond their capacities by practitioners concerned for their well-being. The perception of children as vulnerable due to prior experience may exclude them from being involved in decision-making that may be part of their recovery, in addition to improving their experience in care (Vis et al., 2012; Thomas, 2008). Therefore, while there may be concerns about their capacity to participate in decision-making in this practice area, it is important to note that the capacity to participate in decision-making is not just an attribute – it is a development task (Munro, 2001). Social work practitioners must be willing to ensure that participation in the collective model is in line with the rights-based approach that frames practice in a welfare and protection context.

As this model is supported by independent advocates, it is useful to consider the literature here. Given the challenges that may arise from the interpretation of participation in practice, the inclusion of advocates in collective participation models has the potential to be useful in ensuring that a rights-based approach is implemented. It has been argued that to ensure an advocate plays an effective role in supporting a child to have their views taken into account, they must be independent of social work services (Kennan et al., 2016). This is because social work practitioners have a wide range of responsibilities in case management and work processes that may influence their stance to participation, so an independent advocate is perceived as better placed to maintain a child-focused stance in participation practice (Vis & Thomas, 2009).

As noted by Kennan et al. (2016) in their systematic literature review on the effectiveness of structures and procedures intended to support children and young people's participation, there is a body of evidence that points to advocates as effective enablers of participation. Advocacy has been identified as beneficial in individual opportunities for participation, as the structures and procedural processes of



child welfare processes may be experienced as challenging with regard to the participation of children and young people. The formal and often fraught nature of processes, involving many adult stakeholders, can impede the participation of young service users who have needs regarding information, guidance, and child-friendly practices to support their input into decision-making processes that advocates may provide (Daly, 2014; Gallagher et al., 2012; Vis & Thomas, 2009; Cashmore, 2002).

Given the potentially intimidating nature of individual participatory opportunities, children themselves have testified in a number of studies to the value of having an advocate (Kennan et al., 2016). Children and young people have often expressed their preference for informal processes and for a personal relationship with a trusted advocate or mentor. In a number of studies, children and young people have said they want a 'genuine and personal relationship' with a worker or someone who 'cares about you, listens' and 'actually knows who you are', someone who 'doesn't think they know what's best, just by reading the file' (Cashmore, 2002: 842). For these reasons, access to an ally in informal processes is potentially an enabling factor for collective participation.

Creating partnerships or links with advocacy organisations may be a crucial element in establishing an effective structure for participation. Furthermore, collaboration can encourage the sharing of experience and skills, as well as identifying gaps and opportunities for partnership working in organisations. It has been argued that partnership working can contribute to capacity-building in an organisation and help catalyse organisational change both internally and externally, by introducing different work practices, innovating, and ensuring that young people have their views represented (Wright et al., 2006).

It is important to note that supportive relationships with adult facilitators is not the only relational dimension to collective participation. Child welfare researchers have also discussed the importance of social support in the lives of children in care (Mitchell et al., 2010). The need for social support from their peers was one of the most prominent themes raised by children in a study on transitions into foster care, as a supportive network was considered a vital resource for such children. Consequently, it is argued that participation for foster children is as much about emotional and social recognition as it is about legal recognition in pursuit of their rights (Warming, 2006). Therefore, in this study, attention will be paid to the support that young people in care access from their peers and others, and its utility to collective participation.

A final challenge to participation in the relational context lies in the group dynamics and representativeness of the young participants, particularly when it comes to service and policy development that affects a diverse base of service users in the child protection and welfare context. Recruitment and the active pursuit of children and young people's views may be challenging if sufficient diversity is to be achieved in participation processes. Some cohorts of children and young people may, for various reasons, not be amenable to participation opportunities, while others may require additional supports with implications for resourcing. The 'hard to reach' groups, for example children with disabilities, younger children, those who are unwilling to engage, and non-English-speakers, may impact on representation in this group already marginal to participation (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; McLeod, 2007). The views of some young people are much more likely to be heard than others. Teenagers are more often consulted than younger children, and 'engaged' teenagers are more likely than disaffected teenagers to represent their peers (McLeod, 2007). Therefore, it is argued that the group make-up and dynamics have the potential to affect the effectiveness of collective participation.

## **Situational Factors**

The circumstances in which participation opportunities are enacted are a key consideration. It has been argued that if collective participation is to be effective, certain principles and conditions must be built into these processes, including the creation of a child-friendly space, free from intimidation, where participation as a process takes place over time, using child- and youth-friendly methods mediated through supportive relationships (Vis et al., 2012; Archard & Skiveness, 2009). Furthermore, there may be interactions between situational and relational factors, as time is identified as a crucial factor in the development of trusting supportive relationships (Gallagher et al., 2012; Archard & Skiveness, 2009). This requires participation to be viewed as process, rather than an event.

If reaching an understanding of the viewpoint of a marginalised young person is a time-consuming business requiring a sustained relationship, it is important to consider the role of service resources, both as an influence on decision-making and a constraint to practice (McLeod, 2007). This means that the staff resources and organisational capacity to engage in appropriate participatory processes must be considered (Daly, 2014; Pölkki et al., 2012; Vis et al., 2012; Leeson, 2007). For example, a high turnover of social work staff is a crucial issue in relation to skills development and relational practice, and has the potential to affect participatory practice (Kennan et al., 2017; Munro, 2001). If children and young people in care are to be engaged in service and policy developments, there is a significant number to support and engage in a service context where human resources and time for relational practice remain a concern.

The structures of communication to key decision-makers must also be considered as part of the situational context, if effective participation, characterised as changes in services, policies, and institutions, in social and power relations, and in children's personal development and well-being is to be achieved (Larkins et al., 2014). Systemic relationships between the participation initiatives and decision-makers, where key responsibility for corporate parenting resides, are crucial in enabling effective participation, that is, participation that has some form of transformative or beneficial outcomes (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). Young people's voices are not sufficient to bring about effective and meaningful outcomes; a responsive structure of communication is required between those with the capacity to make decisions and the young participants, to ensure accountability to the process. This means that attention needs to be placed on the effectiveness of participation in conveying the reality of young people's experiences and values to decision-makers, and how young people's voices are responded to (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; Percy-Smith, 2006).

To conclude, genuine and effective participation depends on several conditions; a primary consideration is whether supportive policy and legislation frame practice to enable effective collective participation in a particular service context. Relational and situational factors are also key considerations in evaluating collective participation. McLeod (2007) argues that the practice of listening is often more challenging than theory would suggest, particularly when dealing with disaffected young people. This requires a conscious positioning of both facilitators and organisation to a principled approach to hearing the voice of the child. However, the time and capacity to develop supportive relationships in appropriate processes may be dependent on organisational resources, further affecting participatory practice (Kennan et al., 2016; Gallagher et al., 2012; Archard & Skiveness, 2009; Cashmore, 2002). Spicer and Evans (2006, cited in Seim & Slettebø, 2011: 497) argue that 'achieving the goal of meaningful participation of children in policy-making remains as elusive as ever'. Therefore, there is a need to further investigate models for collective participation in order to provide users with the power to influence services (Larkins et al., 2014: 734).



## 1.5 Overview of the Report

The report contains the following sections:

- Section Two describes the methodological approach to this evaluation, covering the research aims and objectives, data collection methods, and the analytical process.
- Section Three describes the model of collective participation which has been developed by Tusla in partnership with EPIC. It provides brief profiles of six fora.
- Section Four outlines the study findings as framed by the Lundy model (2007). It presents the evidence in relation to the achievement of participatory rights in two parts. The first part concerns the practice indicators of Space and Voice, reflecting on the degree to which the fora provided a safe space for children and young people in care to express their views to Tusla on challenges in the care system, and how they were supported to express their views. The second part explores the access that the young participants had to ‘audiences’ of key decision-makers and considers the evidence in relation to service or policy ‘influence’ as a result of fora operations.
- Section Five draws on the perspectives of the young participants and adult stakeholders to reflect on the benefits that accrue to young people and the organisation as a result of fora operations. This is followed by an outline of the challenges to implementation identified by the research participants.
- Section Six briefly discusses the overall themes that have arisen in the literature and study findings to conclude the evaluation. Following this are concluding remarks on the findings of the study, accompanied by recommendations for future practice.

# 2

## Methodology

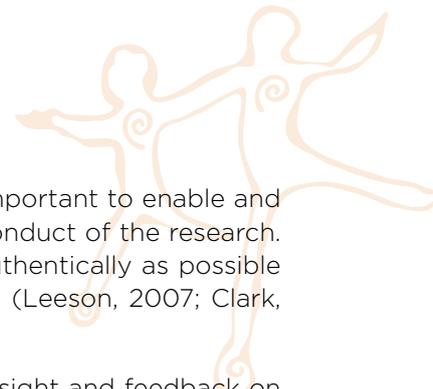
### 2.1 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The overall aim of this study is to explore the extent to which the Foster Care Action Groups established by Tusla, in partnership with EPIC, facilitate the collective participation of children and young people in care, and influence Tusla policy and practice. There are five objectives identified to achieve this aim:

- To describe the model of collective participation developed by Tusla in partnership with EPIC and to provide an operational profile of the established fora.
- To explore the perspectives of stakeholders (including young people, and EPIC and Tusla staff and management) regarding their experiences of involvement with the fora.
- To assess whether the fora have facilitated a safe and inclusive space for children and young people in care to communicate their views.
- To assess whether the fora enabled children and young people in care to communicate their views to Tusla management and whether their views were taken seriously.
- To reflect on the learning in relation to the collective participation of children and young people in care in an Irish context, and to make recommendations for future work in this area.

This research primarily used Lundy's (2007) conceptual model of participation in both research design and analysis, given its centrality to participative practice. It uses the concepts of **space**, **voice**, **audience**, and **influence**, outlined in Lundy's model, to explore the level of participation achieved through participative activities. These factors are all interrelated, and it is argued that if the legal obligation to ensure the appropriate implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) is to be achieved along with transformative participation, they all must be evident in practice (Lundy, 2007).

This study commenced in January 2017 after ethical approval was granted by NUI Galway and Tusla. Data collection was completed by December 2017.



## 2.2 Child and Youth Participation

As this model is underpinned by a rights-based framework, it was considered important to enable and promote participation in both the design of the research instruments and the conduct of the research. This is to ensure that children and youth are empowered and represented as authentically as possible throughout the process, while maximising participation and minimising distress (Leeson, 2007; Clark, 2005).

For this reason, a **Youth Advisory Group** (YAG) was established to provide oversight and feedback on various aspects of the study design and implementation. The group was composed of two young people aged between 12 and 13 years who have been involved in EPIC fora. The YAG provided feedback on matters such as the design and wording of information sheets and consent forms, and the methodology used in focus groups.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.3 Sampling Strategy

At the start of the research, fifteen fora were established or were due to be established in the near future. To ensure that the conduct of the study was feasible in the given timeframe, it was not possible to include young people and staff or management from all fora areas. Therefore, a purposive sample of eight fora was selected at the start of the study. In choosing the study areas, the aim was to ensure a diverse sample in terms of age range of participants, geographical location, length of time in operation, demographic variables (such as residential group participants or foster care fora), and the number of participants in the group. The original target areas were:

1. Carlow/Kilkenny/South Tipperary (residential)
2. Cork (longest running)
3. Dublin North City (8-12, urban)
4. Cavan/Monaghan (8-12, rural)
5. Galway (wide age range)
6. Mid-West (good mix of urban and rural)
7. Donegal (newest)
8. Dublin South Central (large cohort of potential participants)

Direct involvement with the collective fora in a region or nationally was the criterion for inclusion of participants, including young people, EPIC staff, social workers, principal social workers, area managers, and other stakeholders. It was beyond the scope of this study to research the reasons for non-engagement with collective fora in a region or nationally on the part of young people or staff.

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<sup>1</sup> It was hoped to conduct a further dissemination event with representatives from all fora areas in the study where feedback on emergent findings and help with interpretation of the views would be sought. However, this proved challenging to organise due to staffing constraints, given the requirements of accompaniment and consent-seeking for this event. In order to address this challenge to participation, the emerging issues of importance to the young participants were compiled into a youth-friendly feedback sheet to assess whether the interpretation of themes was acceptable and to offer an opportunity to offer feedback and add to the research. Fourteen participants completed the feedback process.

Focus groups were held with young people in five of the eight potential fora areas sampled, while staff and management interviews were conducted with staff from seven areas. It had been intended to conduct focus groups in all eight areas, but this did not prove possible for the following reasons:

- The Cavan/Monaghan Foster Care Action Group, for children aged 8-12, only met once. As this group did not perceive any challenges in the care process, any further activities planned would be social in nature rather than service-related.
- The proposed group for children and young people in residential care in Carlow proved logistically difficult to initiate and did not become established.<sup>2</sup>
- It was not possible to meet with the Cork fora, as the majority of the original group had aged out of the initiative, and achieving the numbers necessary for focus group research was not possible. Meanwhile, a new group set up in that area had not begun the process and therefore could not input into the research.

**Table 1: Focus Group Sample and the Number of Participants**

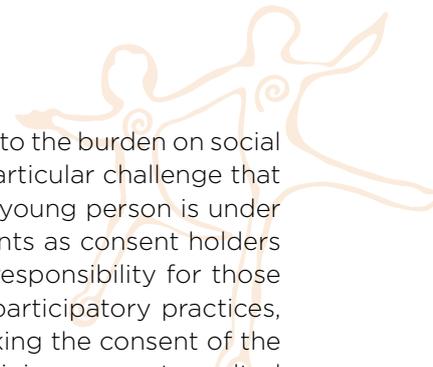
Fora Area	Number of Participants
Carlow/Kilkenny/South Tipperary	0
Cork	0
Dublin North	5
Cavan Monaghan	0
Galway	4
Mid-West	7
Donegal	7
Dublin South Central	5
<b>Total number of participants</b>	<b>28</b>

## 2.4 Recruitment of Participants

EPIC coordinated the recruitment and consent process for data protection reasons. Information sheets were sent out to the children and young people and to their foster parents via local social work teams two weeks before the date of the meetings at which the advisory group or focus groups were due to take place. Relevant adult stakeholders from Tusla and EPIC also received information sheets at least two weeks before the study in their area.

A contact list of stakeholders was provided by EPIC, which included the details of 37 stakeholders who were invited to interview. The number of participants recruited to this study was 20 overall.

<sup>2</sup> Feedback from stakeholders suggests that this was due to two operational difficulties. Firstly, the forum relied on staff from the residential centres to engage in planning and accompaniment, while maintaining staffing levels in the residential unit. The second challenge related to social work involvement in the consent processes and the operation of the forum. The nature of residential care often meant that the young people's social workers were based in a different catchment area, which had implications for staffing resources required to operate the fora.



The engagement of young people in the research proved challenging at times due to the burden on social workers, foster parents, and young participants with regard to participation. A particular challenge that arose during the study was obtaining consent. The type of care order a child or young person is under defines the consent holder for that particular child, with the guardian(s) or parents as consent holders for those under a voluntary care order and the Principal Social Worker having responsibility for those under a care order. Consent under a voluntary care order has implications for participatory practices, as social workers must seek out informed consent from the guardian before seeking the consent of the child, and this requires time to be set aside. Unfortunately, difficulties with obtaining consent resulted in the cancellation and rescheduling of two planned research fora and the exclusion of two participants from the research process.

The principle of voluntary informed consent was adhered to throughout this study. Potential participants and their caregiver(s) were provided with information that outlined in simple language the purpose of the study, what the data would be used for, how confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained, and the limits of this principle. The voluntary nature of the consent was reiterated throughout the study, and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw or not participate at any stage or for any task.

## 2.5 Overview of Data Collection Methods

Three approaches to data collection were used in this study.

**Focus groups** were conducted with young people in five fora areas to explore the young people's experiences of involvement and perceived outcomes of the fora. The 1½-hour focus groups were conducted as part of a scheduled fora meeting and facilitated by two members of the research team. The aim of this process was to explore the perspectives of young people involved in this initiative with regard to space, voice, audience, and influence (Lundy, 2007). EPIC and Tusla staff were present but waiting outside during this part of the meeting.

The focus group design was informed by the UNCRC (1989) and Lundy's (2007) Voice Model. Creative methodologies framed the questions in a manner that could be clearly understood in line with the young participants' right to information (Article 17) and guidance (Article 5). Lundy's (2007) frame prescribed the development of questions used as part of this evaluation.

In line with the principle of beneficence and the requirement of informed consent, activities were built into the structure of the research fora to allow for queries and clarification on the research process, an outline of the limits of confidentiality in line with the Children First Act (2015) and the assessment of participants' well-being both before and after the focus group. This was to ensure that any arising needs for support were addressed in a timely manner (see Table 2.2). The activities used as part of this research were a graffiti wall (space), an activity frieze and helping hands (voice), and decision diamonds (audience and influence).

**Table 2: Focus Group Format**

Activity	Content	Rationale
Introduction and Icebreaker	How you heard about EPIC, what is a researcher, and what is research?	Informed consent and rapport
Ongoing Consent and Disclosure protocol	What research is about, you can pass a question, leave, or do something else. No secrets if in danger or if someone is harming you.	Informed consent and limits of confidentiality
Energiser	An Energy Graph	Any concerns about research
Space	A Graffiti Wall and Chat	Is the forum a safe space to talk about being in care?
Voice	A Frieze for the Wall and Chat	A Frieze for the Wall and Chat How are you supported to speak about your experience?
Break	Pizza, Chat, Games	Enable Concentration
Audience and Influence	Mask of the Expert or Diamond Decision Box	Who's listening to what you say, and how much influence do you have about what happens next?
Wish Box	Put wish strips into a box	What would you like to get out of the forum? Any suggestions?
Reflection	Energy Graph	Any issues with the research?
Close	Support Sheets	Just in case...

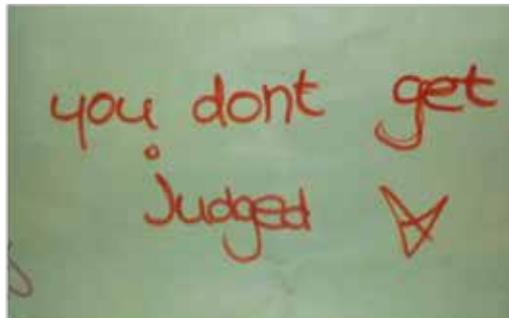
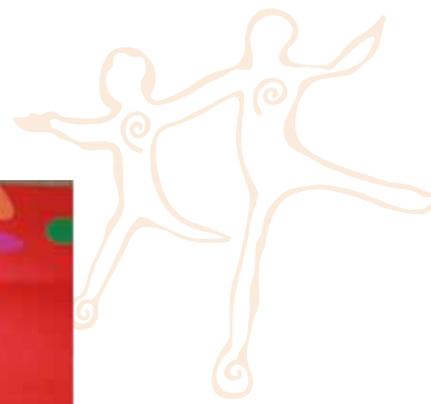


Figure 2.1: Sample Focus Group Research Documents

**Semi-structured one-to-one qualitative interviews** were conducted with the staff of EPIC and with other relevant adult stakeholders, such as social work practitioners and area managers, to explore their perspective on their experiences of involvement in the fora and to explore the degree to which the fora have influenced policy and practice in Tusla. These were conducted face to face or by telephone to maximise participation. This research method aims to gather information relative to Lundy’s (2007) Voice Model checklist, specifically the third and fourth indicators of audience and influence.

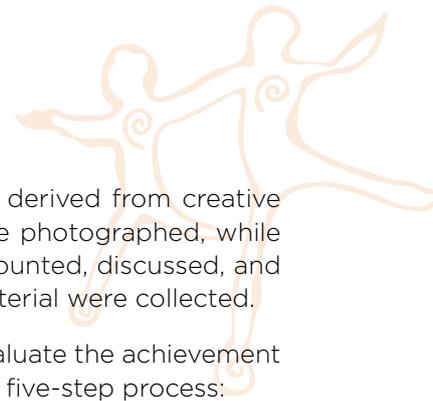
**Table 3: Number of Adult Stakeholders by Area**

Area	Number of Participants
Cork	0
Dublin North City	0
Dublin South	5
Mid-West	0
Donegal	4
Galway	7
Cavan/Monaghan	7
National	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

**Table 4: Number of Adult Stakeholders by Role**

Role	Number of Participants
Area Managers	3
Principal Social Workers	3
Social Workers	3
Social Care Staff	4
EPIC Management	2
EPIC Advocates	2
Business Manager	3
Participation Officer	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

**Documentary Analysis.** Documentation from EPIC and Tusla, including plans, records of fora activities, and outputs such as recommendations that arise from the conduct of the fora, were used to build an operational profile and to assess outcomes in relation to the fourth Lundy’s (2007) Voice Model checklist with regard to influence. and Youth Participation Programme of Work may have been limited in its scope



## 2.6 Data Analysis

Data from the focus groups and interviews were transcribed in full, while data derived from creative techniques were digitised. All documentation such as charts and drawings were photographed, while physical activities such as a moving vote or a temperature scale were verbally counted, discussed, and recorded. No photographs of children or young people, names, or identifying material were collected.

Following transcription and digitisation, framework analysis was performed to evaluate the achievement of participatory rights in the fora and to reflect on future practice. This entailed a five-step process:

- Familiarisation with the data was the first step in the analysis process.
- Emerging themes were then identified using a priori knowledge gleaned from literature, including relational factors and situational factors that have a perceived effect on the collective participation of young people in care. Additional consideration was given to the perception of challenges and benefits of the process.
- The fourth stage consisted of indexing the data using NVivo to categorise portions of documents according to emerging themes.
- The fourth stage consisted of indexing the data using NVivo to categorise portions of documents according to emerging themes.
- Finally, the data was charted using Excel to organise the thematically coded data into a framework defined by Lundy's (2007) Voice Model. This chart of data then allowed for the construction of a narrative of participant's perspectives which could then be condensed and analysed using Lundy's model and the relevant literature (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).

**Table 5: Framework Analysis**

Area	Space		Voice		Audience		Influence		Other	
	Youth	Pro's	Youth	Pro's	Youth	Pro's	Youth	Pro's	Youth	Pro's
Themes										
Relationships	*	*	*	*					*	*
Activities	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Situational factor	*	*	*	*		*		*	*	*
Products/ Outputs					*	*	*	*	*	*
Evidence of Influence							*	*	*	*
Benefits									*	*
Challenges									*	*

## 2.7 Summary

This section has given an overview of the qualitative methods used to capture the data, including the sampling strategy and sample specific research techniques, along with the methods of data analysis used to evaluate the collective participation of children and young people in care using a rights based model. The discussion of the findings that emerged from this qualitative, cross-sectional study will be discussed further in Sections four and five in order to reflect on the achievement of participatory rights for young people in care as a result of this collective initiative.

# 3

## Description of the Tusla / EPIC Foster Care Action Groups Model

### 3.1 Overview of the Tusla and EPIC Model of Collective Participation

In October 2014, three local youth forums were set up by Tusla in conjunction with EPIC. Meetings had taken place in Dublin North City, Cavan/Monaghan, and Cork. This comprised a pilot phase of the project (Daly, 2016). The key aim of these Foster Care Action Groups, known as the Tusla and EPIC fora, is to consult with young people in foster care and to seek their views on care-related issues that are important to them. They constitute a formal mechanism by which young people can be facilitated and supported to engage directly on the reform and monitoring of care locally with the management of Tusla and nationally with senior policy-makers. Following the pilot phase, a further six fora had been established by January 2016. This number has since expanded to a total of fifteen fora established nationwide (Kennan et al., 2017).

### 3.2 Processes: How the Fora Work

The fora were developed in partnership between Tusla and EPIC. Following an initial consultation and pilot phase, EPIC's Participation Coordinator worked in partnership with Tusla to build a national capacity in the organisation to develop and sustain participation structures for young people, and to ensure that their views and concerns are heard and that they contribute to policy and practice development in Tusla.

The fora were planned and overseen by regional working groups consisting of diverse practitioners within a local area, who reported back to a National Oversight Group and Regional Directors of Services. These working groups convened a diverse range of actors depending on the locale. These could include principal social workers, social workers, social care leaders, participation officers, a children's rights officer, advocates, and voluntary and community sector partners. These working groups, along with the fora, were coordinated on a national basis by the EPIC Participation Coordinator. A key component of each group is access to a decision-maker in that locale, such as a Principal Social Worker or an Area Manager.

The work of these groups was in an organisational capacity, agreeing parameters such as age limits, liaising with social work departments to identify candidates, and in some cases engaging with social workers to assess whether the forum was a suitable participation opportunity for particular children, along with other practical logistical considerations, such as recruitment, fora dates, locations, and types of facilitation offered. The agenda for the fora was set by the young participants themselves.

The working method varied across the six fora sampled, with some areas engaging outside facilitators to workshop with the young participants using creative techniques, and others working through roundtable discussion and group work processes. Each forum was facilitated and guided by members of the working groups with support from the EPIC participation coordinator at child-friendly times.



Recruitment strategies entailed mailing children and young people in the catchment area, and direct invitation via social worker or care worker. Recruitment levels were relatively low for each area; areas with larger numbers of children in care, such as Dublin and Cork, had higher numbers. Areas with larger geographical areas to be covered reported challenges with access to the forum due to logistical reasons.

### 3.3 Operational Profile of the Fora

A brief operational profile of six fora is provided in order to give a flavour of the breadth of activities and the composition of the various groups.

#### **Cork Forum: “My Life, My Choice”**

This forum was initially active for four years (2013–2017) and its operation had been intended to be cyclical.

The first group met approximately 15-20 times over its lifecycle.

There are approximately 750 young people in the care of Tusla within the catchment area however recruitment remains challenging. This is despite a number of different strategies being employed ranging from letter writing, social work and EPIC direct contact invitations, and peer recruitment. An open day and consultations were also held to encourage uptake.

**Youth Participants:** The forum is open to young participants aged 13-17 and is on its second cycle of work with young participants. The original group has aged out, but members have expressed an interest in continuing on as mentors. The number of participants in the first round was 17 which dropped to 15 over time. The second group consists of 10 members, but this group has yet to establish themselves. This area has had a total of 27 participants over all. Young participants with additional needs participated in this forum.

**Staff Involved:** Principal Social Worker, EPIC Management, EPIC Participation Coordinator, Epic Advocate, Social Work. This fora reporting back to the Area Manager.

**Activities:** Team building exercises, Christmas Parties, and meetings with Tusla staff.

**Facilitation:** A local rap artist was commissioned to work with the youth and develop their ideas into a rap-based message for other children in care and the professionals who work with them. EPIC has also brought in a community artist to work with the group.

#### **Outputs:**

- The young participants have performed their Rap at open days for the forum, and at Care Day conferences to share their insights and experiences with practitioners
- This forum has developed a new childcare review form currently in local operation
- Members of this forum have travelled to European events to present on their work and to gather information
- This forum has been involved with designing the outline for an APP that would allow for better contact between social workers and children in care. This proposal is currently being reviewed by the National Office



### Dublin/ South Wicklow Forum

This forum was in operation for one year between 2016 and 2017. It was operated as a temporary forum, but there are plans in place to progress to more cyclical operation on an ongoing basis. This forum was open to all young people in foster care above 12 years old and included young participants with additional needs who were invited to participate by letter or through social work practitioners.

**Youth Participants:** 15 young people aged 12-17 years. This forum included young participants with additional needs.

**Staff Involved:** The EPIC Participation Coordinator, EPIC Advocacy Volunteer, Social Work, Reporting to the Principal Social worker.

**Activities:** Team-building days out at adventure centres.

**Facilitation:** This group worked on their projects through roundtable discussions aided by adult facilitators and information and feedback from the social work team. Members of this group also went on network trips abroad and went out for dinner.

#### Outputs:

- Project around accessing their files
- Drama presented at the Forum National Conference
- A welcome pack for Childcare reviews to make it a friendlier experience
- Youth members travelled to international summit for children in care to network and share information
- Presentation at Tusla Participation Conference



Figure 3.2: Sample Fora Product: Information Leaflet

### **Donegal Forum: Athrú**

This forum was in operation for one year from 2017–2018. From a catchment area where 91 children are in the care of Tusla, this forum recruited 13, but only seven attended until the end. Recruitment strategies involved sending invitations to the children and young people, sending information to the foster parents, and direct recruitment activities by social workers and EPIC. This forum convened five times over its lifetime. No young people with additional needs participated. It is intended that this initiative will be cyclical, and reflection is currently under way on how best to plan for continuity.

**Youth Participants:** This forum was open to those between 12 and 17 years old. They began with 14 members, but it reduced to eight over time.

**Staff Involved:** Tusla Participation officer, EPIC Participation Coordinator, Social Care staff, Aftercare staff. Reporting to the Area Manager, who acted as social work on call.

**Activities:** Presentation at Athlone Participation Conference. Presentation to the senior management team.

**Facilitation:** This group worked on developing their product and plan of action through roundtable discussion, assisted by the staff involved.

#### **Outputs:**

- Passport for Children and Young People in Care, entering into or moving between foster placements
- Consultations with Foróige regarding the potential set-up of a youth group, particularly for children and young people in care

### **Galway United Forum**

This forum was in operation for a year, 2016–2017, and convened about 10 meetings. Out of approximately 100 children in the care of Tusla in the catchment area, this forum recruited 12 young participants through written invitation and direct recommendation by social workers and EPIC. Children who were deemed to be in emotional distress were excluded from recruitment on the advice of Social Workers. This forum had young participants with additional needs. It is intended that this forum will be cyclical in nature, but there is yet to be any planning for continuity in this regard. The regional social work office is interested in continuing social events for the children in the catchment area.

**Youth Participants:** This forum is open to youth participants between the ages of 12 and 15, and 12 young people took part.

**Staff Involved:** EPIC Participation Coordinator, EPIC Advocate, Business Manager, Foster Carer Support worker, reporting to the Principal Social Worker.

**Activities:** Games and team-building activities which are of central importance to this group.

**Facilitation:** Roundtable discussion with guidance and advice from their 'Supporters'.

#### **Outputs:**

- Organisation of Big Day Out for Care Day for their peers
- Organisation of activities for the Forum Conference to give a taste of the forum experience



### **Mid-West Forum**

This forum was in operation for two years over 2016 and 2017 and recruited 14 young participants from a cohort of 600 young people in care in the catchment area, covering both rural and urban areas. Because it had access to a recreational residential centre, this forum was able to engage in intense sessions of reflections on the care process, along with fun activities such as movie night at overnight stays. This was beneficial in maximising attendance and productivity, given the logistics involved in organising dates for forum meetings across a diversity of staff and young people's schedules in an extensive geographical catchment area over both rural and urban settings.

**Youth Participants:** This forum is open to 12–18-year-olds and accommodated one young participant with additional needs.

**Staff Involved:** Participation Officer, EPIC Participation Coordinator, EPIC Advocate, Social Worker, Extern Staff, Social Care Workers, reporting to the Area Manager and feeding back to the children in care teams.

**Activities:** Team-building activities, traditional forum games, movie nights, and overnights.

**Facilitation:** This forum's work was primarily supported through roundtable discussion, but there was also an opportunity for some participants to help produce a visual piece.

**Outputs:**

- Performance and discussion at the National Fora Conference
- Video piece for dissemination to local social work teams

## 3.4 Summary

This section has given a brief overview of the operational profile of the fora. As the fora activities were coordinated on a national basis by the EPIC Participation Officer, the processes of planning and operations were similar amongst all areas. Recruitment was a challenge for all fora areas in this evaluation. Three out of the five fora sampled accommodated young participants with additional needs. Team building activities were an important feature on a national basis. There were minor differences in the access to decision makers, ranging from direct involvement in for a operations to reporting procedures, and from principal social workers to area managers. There were also differences in the focus of fora operations, but as these issues were identified at a local level through youth led agenda setting this is to be expected. These operational characteristics will be further discussed in the subsequent sections.

# 4

## Findings

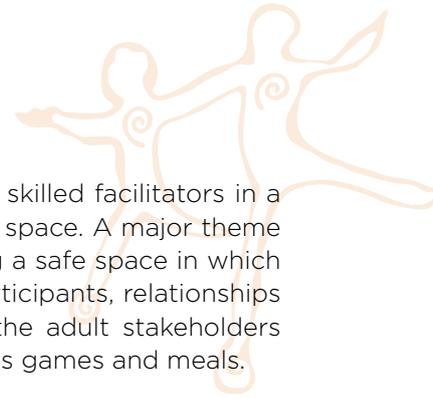
This section consists of an evaluation of practice using the Lundy model (2007). The data was thematically organised using framework analysis to match emerging thematic patterns on to four practice indicators derived from the Voice Model: **Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence**. Within these indicators for practice, consideration will be given to situational factors, which are the circumstances embedded in a policy-driven organisational context in which participation is encouraged, and the relational factors, that is, the influence of various actors in interaction with each other, to consider collective participation for young people in care. As there is significant overlap between Space and Voice, and between Audience and Influence, this chapter is divided into two sections, followed by a discussion of how participation rights were achieved through the operation of the fora.

### 4.1 Space and Voice Introduction

The concepts of space and voice are chronologically first in the process of participatory practice and are interlinked in practice. Lundy (2007) asserts that the space for participation must be a safe space, free from fear of recrimination and with no discrimination regarding access, be that on the grounds of disability or perceived capacity to participate. This is because the first part of Article 12 does not require a demonstrated capacity for participation. Consideration of age and emerging capabilities is only required in the second part of this article. The safe space is a prerequisite for the facilitation of voice, which interacts with the right to guidance and information provided for in the UNCRC (1989). A wide variety of methods should be considered in order to ensure that children can be facilitated to express a view in line with their emerging capacities. In considering the checklist requirements of space and voice, the situational and relational factors that enable the achievement of these concepts will be considered (Pölkki et al., 2012; Horwath et al., 2011).

#### 4.1.1 Space

This section looks at the idea of a safe space. In the Lundy model, a safe space free from discrimination in relation to access, and from recrimination as a result of voicing opinions, is key to ensuring the participation of children. This is particularly important when considering the participation of children and young people in care who are reliant on adult stakeholders for service provision, have potentially experienced vulnerability, and report feelings of stigma in their everyday lives.



## Relational Factors

Relational factors, such as the development of trusting relationships supported by skilled facilitators in a youth-friendly format, were found to be important to the development of a safe space. A major theme that arose during the research was that trusting relationships are key to creating a safe space in which children and young people can contribute their views. Indeed, for the young participants, relationships were of primary importance. These relationships were actively facilitated by the adult stakeholders through the use of team-building activities, days out, and forum traditions such as games and meals.

*I'd say what really brought us together was the adventure day out. We went on this day out, it was so cool, to, like, an adventure centre. It was the day poor [participant] over here lost his shoe in a bog! It was so funny. (Young Person, Case Area 3)*

*It is about relationship and trust building as well. If you can build a group where trust and respect are paramount within the group, well then you are going to get more honesty. And you get young people to engage a lot more too in something they enjoy doing. So, we played the games with them, we didn't just stand back and let them play by themselves or direct them how to play. We actually took part in all the games as well. And I think it subconsciously feeds into the young people that they are no different to us, at this point in time they are the same as us. They are doing the same things, participating in the same things. Try and make them feel as comfortable as possible, and you don't want to look like too official. (Respondent 4)*

The Fora model, as a youth-led process over time rather than a procedural event, helps develop trust with their adult facilitators and peers. These relationships take time to develop, particularly when it comes to sharing their experiences of care processes with Tusla staff.

*It takes them a long time to establish trust, both with each other as part of the group and then with facilitators, quickly identified that the EPIC staff as independent advocates, but I think it takes them a bit longer, to recognise that maybe there is Tusla staff there and to trust them. (Respondent 3)*

Peer support and a feeling of belonging are crucial to the constitution of a safe space for the youth to express their views. This is due to the sense of stigma that can result from feelings of discomfort often experienced in interactions with other young people in their community, when the differences in lifestyle and relationships as a result of being in care become visible, as reported by the young participants.

*No, it's just like, as you mentioned, before it's much easier to talk to someone who is in the same scenario as you, and then you don't have the awkward silence and saying, 'Is that because, do you see your Dad or see your Mum?' That whole awkwardness of it, awkwardness about being in care. (Young Person Case Area 1)*

*We're all in care, so like we don't judge each other. (Young Person Case Area 2)*

For this reason, a dedicated space where only children and young people in care were invited was seen by one practitioner as a key consideration for creating a safe space.

*Now it can sometimes be difficult for them. What came up at that agenda day was that children in care didn't want to talk in that sort of an open forum about their experiences because they're giving information to other people that they didn't want to give out, which is fair enough. (Respondent 15)*

*Oftentimes for children and young people in care, they spend so much time hiding their care identity in school, with friends, explaining it away because other young people don't understand. Kids would say, 'Oh, they think I'm adopted or my parents are drug addicts or whatever.' So they don't get into it. Our group in Limerick, they look like a middle-class youth club if you went in to meet with them, and we asked them, 'How many of you have told your friends that you're in care?' and of the ten of them, one young person. That's a big, big secret to tell. (Respondent 6)*

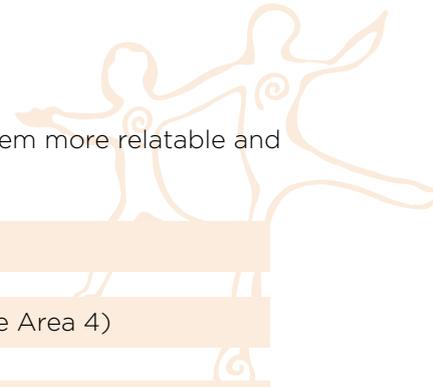
Having access to a group of their peers for support was reported to reduce feelings of isolation that occurs due to the unique nature of being in care. This made it easier to communicate their feelings about their journey through the care process in a community of shared experience.

*So just knowing they are not the only ones, so therefore not that different. Because everywhere else they are, in the school, in the foster home, in the club, they might be the only kid in care and so they feel different. But they suddenly come together with a group of other young people, and again the extraordinary thing is, when you meet these young people, and you will meet some of them, how normal they are, how different but how normal. (Respondent 1)*

*So I think it gives them that space and it gives them that permission to actually say what they think. Because once they voice it and they know they can voice it there, because they know everybody else there knows what they're talking about, that kind of sparks a big conversation and you know? They're all, 'Aw, that happened to me and yes, that's exactly what I'm...'. And then to get them to say, 'Okay, you've had that, now could you funnel that down to something that we're telling the system? This is what we'd like to see change.' And they've done it, you know? (Respondent 14)*

Staff understood that they had a key role to play in creating a child-friendly environment and were conscious of this in their reflection on practice. There was an acknowledgement that this model called for informal relaxed spaces to promote the development of supportive interpersonal relationships.

*So you don't want them coming in looking like just as uptight staff either. So you have to try and make it relaxed and you know? Take part in the wee icebreakers, you know? Very much, you know? Try and relate to them and show them that you can relate to them, so when they do, they will open up and talk to you, you know? (Respondent 5)*



The capacity of stakeholders to adopt a more relaxed mode of working made them more relatable and engaging to the youth participants across all the sample areas.

*They are really caring. (Young Person Case Area 2)*

*The grownups? Well, we love them, how they all go on. (Young Person Case Area 4)*

*Like, they don't act like they are minding you, they act like, they treat you like their friend. (Young Person Case Area 4)*

*The adults, they're not very adult, are they? (Young Person Case Area 1)*

A further example of relational practice in support of the creation of a safe space is evident in the facilitators positioning themselves as non-judgemental and actively willing to listen to the young people so that they could freely express their views without fear of reproach.

*It's about taking the time to listen to them and also encourage them to make a space where they feel comfortable saying, sometimes we're uncomfortable saying things or saying things that would be challenging to us, and to feel safe doing that, you know, so that we can hear it without getting all defensive about it. (Respondent 18)*

Given the challenging nature of the experience of the care process for many young people, this open, non-judgemental stance helped promote open communication on the views of the young participants, which is important given the young people's reliance on staff and audience members for their access to services. This can be considered evidence of relational practice, creating a safe space free from fear of recriminations, as outlined by Lundy (2007).

*Oh my God, no seriously, I need to leave, no word of a lie, I went on a rampage for about fifteen minutes and I was just like, 'I hate social workers, I hate everything', but the thing was like they understood. (Young Participant Case Area 3)*

Staff capacities to handle any challenging or emotional situations that may arise as a result of the forum operations were also key to the provision of a safe space. This added to the potential of the collective model of participation to act in meeting any unmet needs of the young participants.

*There was staff there, so if any young person was finding it difficult, whatever was the issue or you know? They had somebody to talk to. And we had actually organised that amongst ourselves as well as a team – that if there was anybody who needed to have a time out or any of the young people that we would, you know, make a space available for them to talk one on one with somebody, just to check that they were okay, and I suppose we were also aware of child protection stuff as well. So if anything came up, we had set up a plan for discussing that as well with the appropriate people, but yes, no, it definitely was a safe space for young people. I hope that they felt it was a safe space. (Respondent 7)*

This helped the young participants feel supported and that it was safe to express themselves throughout the process.

*It's like whenever we ever we open up to anything, they like distract us to kind of coping mechanisms, I didn't like, if I was like, 'I really want to come to here because I'm like really close to people in this group', and like they don't judge you like. (Young Participant Case Area 4)*

### **Situational Factors**

The format of the forum also served to create a sense of safety in which the experience of care could be discussed. The ratio of child to adult was reversed, and neutral adults sought feedback on their experiences outside of formal, task-oriented care processes. This is key, given the young people in care's common challenging experience of other participation opportunities engaging with larger numbers of adults with a high level of control over the lived experience of the young person (Pölkki et al., 2012; McEvoy & Smith, 2011; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2010; Cashmore, 2002).

*They have the craic with us, the last few days with us. But like, you know, they don't have an iron bar up their backsides with us, like. You know? (Young Person Case Area 1)*

*No one is going, 'How's it going for you?' and your foster carer is sitting beside them, 'Yes, grand!' But it gives them a chance to think about, well, what's that like for you, do you know what I mean? (Respondent 20)*

*So they come all metaphorically armed up [to] deal with adults, and then when you find that that's not the normal, it's not the way it normally is here, there's something different here, they gradually relax. And then when they get a sense of actually what is going on, they then become more proactive in their engagement. And at the end of the day, you know, they're having good fun, which you would always like to see. You know? (Respondent 14)*

### **4.1.2 Voice**

This section considers the second checklist item of Lundy's model: Voice. According to this model, the space and voice factors have a significant overlap in implementation, so it is important to consider the role that supportive relationships have in enabling the voice of the child in collective decision-making. Voice is also facilitated through supportive trusting adults providing information and guidance, along with enabling activities and methods that support the voice of children and young people of varying capacities in the expression of their point of view.



## Relational Factors

The supportive relationships of their peers may also be foundational when it comes to the young participants using their voices and expressing their views.

*You don't just have like the support of EPIC. Other young people like us are here; we support each other and sort of help each other through it. Like, say for me, for example: when I first came to the Fora group I was kind of like, I was kind of nervous about talking in front of people, and then being part of the Fora group helped me talk in conferences as well as like going to Switzerland and stuff because of EPIC. Like, that helped me hugely, and they help you as well, I know that for a fact. (Young Participant Case Area 3)*

## Situational Factors

The fora format, as a relaxed process led by children and young people, is considerably different from more formal procedural meetings in which the young participants were asked to participate. This is perceived to have the potential to facilitate the voice of youth participants by removing stress.

*The bit about the fora was that it was relaxing, sort of low-stress environment. And a nice and neutral sort of environment. If you're at childcare reviews, it's kind of stressful and worrying and, you know, emotional, all those things that will limit the maybe getting people's true views on things. I don't know, I mean you might get very emotional responses to questions that you would ask, whereas the fora allowed stuff to emerge naturally in a non-stressed environment, and, you know, you were getting a sort of a good objective view of things rather than getting it from a more stressful setting or, you know, context. (Respondent 5)*

The young participants also required time to reflect on what they were being asked to do in order to have an authentic voice and express their opinions. This requires commitment to the idea of participation as a process rather than a one-off event.

*It doesn't just take once or twice for people to meet up, because these weren't happening kind of every couple of weeks, it might have been two or three months apart, so like, that takes time, do you know? For people to be able to talk about I suppose their own experiences and, you know, their own wishes and views. That would take much longer than that, you know? That space that wasn't rushed, and there was no kind of motive, you know, to get things rushed and done and completed, you know? It was just, I think that's, you know, I would have no qualms about how long that it went, because I suppose it takes people a while to get to know each other, it takes people a while to come out of their shell, and it takes people a long time to come up with ideas, do you know? And even when they come up with ideas, I suppose, for them, ideas to change is okay too, you know? (Respondent 9)*

Staff remained supportive of young people setting the agenda and taking control of the group, even if the young people did not want to engage with the original goal of the forum, that is, to influence policy and service delivery. This practice is essential to avoid the suppression of views by imposing a top-down agenda.

*They're not bossy, like, they don't say, 'You have to do this' or 'You have to do that', they just, it's not like they would let us do whatever they want, but they're not like, they're not bossy. They feed ye. And they let you have fun. (Young Participant Case Area 2)*

*They could make a plan, you know, if we have one meeting and we make a plan for the next. At the moment now what they want to do is they want to have, make or have hoodies, zip-ups; I'm sure you heard about it. So we'd say, 'Okay, well that involves this, this and this. Who would like to take on this? Who would like to take on this role?' And they would adopt their own little jobs, and even if it's things like designing invitations or designing a logo or anything like that, that's what they do. If something comes up, then we will set an agenda and we'll give little roles, and we'll do a little feedback at the next session. And that's how we kind of work together, but it's at their pace, and it's what they want to do rather than us leading it. And I think that's what's working for us in that the kids still want to come back; there's been no drop-outs. They obviously find benefit from it, you know. (Respondent 19)*

This open format where young people set the agenda and defined the use of the participatory space is in line with the stated principle of voluntary engagement with the fora by the young people, outlined by practitioners in fidelity to rights-based practice.

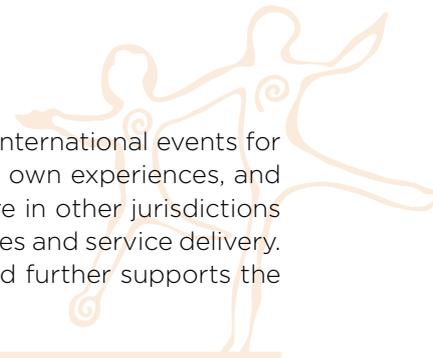
*This is a decision we make in the beginning. You can either direct those fora to look at things you want them to look at, or you can have an open agenda where the young people decide what it is they do. I think in our case we took the view that, look, let the young people set the agenda and then see what we go from there. (Respondent 15)*

The provision of information and support is important for the young participants' expression of their views. Social work practitioners' specialised contextual knowledge about practice requirements enabled the young participants to reflect on their experience and consider what areas in which it is possible to influence change.

*Most importantly that they know their rights. I think that's always key, you know, I think a lot of the time, sometimes young people aren't clear themselves on what they can ask for and or what they can't ask for. (Respondent 17)*

Young people were also assisted through the process of developing their project with help and information from advocates who looked into what was possible for their project to include, when an expressed concern did not seem as though it was actionable, providing a balance to the accepted narrative on care regulations.

*Yeah. [The EPIC Coordinator] wrote down the questions that the people said, and she brought it to the big boss, I think it was. (Young Participant Case Area 3)*



Young participants from two of the fora areas had an opportunity to network at international events for children in care to learn about care experiences in other jurisdictions, share their own experiences, and bring new knowledge home. This facilitated reflection on different models of care in other jurisdictions that had the potential to spark reflection and the development of ideas on processes and service delivery. This promoted the development of capacity to advocate on their own behalf and further supports the expression of views from the group through the transmission of ideas.

*At night-time there'd be like a camp fire, and if you wanted to talk about your experience in care, you could; if you didn't want to, you didn't have to. You could listen to other people. It was just learning about the care system in Scotland and how it differs to Ireland. And like it was, like, it was interesting. You'd be sitting there and like, oh, if you could take this from the Scottish one and give you this from the Irish one, you know. It would make the perfect, you know, care system. For example, like in Scotland, you know, you want to have a sleepover with your friend; you want them to sleep over for the night or whatever. In Scotland, you had the Guards have to check your house, that sort of thing. But you don't need that here. I made friends over there and they were like, 'Oh, can we take that rule from Ireland and we'll give you this one', you know. Like stuff like that. So it was really interesting. (Young Participant Case Area 3)*

Some fora used creative methodologies to support the expression of the young participants' views. Some young people had help from art and music facilitators to help develop their ideas and think about ways it could be communicated to others. This flexibility in practice enables the voice of young people in care to express views on matters that are important to them by framing the issues, generating group creativity, and helping them to understand shared experiences.

*In what way do you think it helps? ... Little projects, like we are doing here, little brainstorming sheets. Like, we are doing a book, dictionary, for the EPIC, so I think everyone is given a little project to do saying write down what they think foster means and what they feel about fostering, like that little thing. We brainstormed key words and then we came up with the definition, and then we just kind of put it together in an easier form for everyone to understand. (Young Person Case Area 5)*

Others preferred to work through discussion, finding that working in a group is enough to help generate ideas.

*Discussion mostly. Sitting down taking, making decisions as a group. Listening to each other. Well, it sort of helps us with other ideas, so like if someone says something, what they think, then we add on to it. We'll see what comes out of it. (Young Person Case Area 1)*

## 4.2 Audience and Influence Introduction

This section will consider the indicators of Audience and Influence outlined by the Lundy model (2007). Lundy's *Voice Model* considers the *Audience* for the opinions expressed by young people to be key. This audience must consist of key decision-makers with the power to take action after views are given due weight in line with the emerging capabilities of the young people. Feedback is a crucial part of this process to prevent tokenism and to ensure that *Influence* is exerted in line with the right to have a say in matters that concern them.

### 4.2.1 Audience

The primary audience for the views and opinions expressed in the Tusla and EPIC Foster Care Action Groups were built into its structure: the *Regional Working Groups* to whom the messages of the fora would be transmitted. The actors in the working group vary across the sampled fora, but all contained decision-makers or had access to decision-makers through reporting activities. This access varied by area. Two fora reported back to a Principal Social Worker, three to Area Managers. These working groups had the responsibility to oversee the development of the fora at a local level and report back to a *National Oversight Group*, whose role was to identify and facilitate the transmutation of recommendations into policy and practice. Because access to Audience is built into practice, this can be considered a *situational factor* that enables or constrains participation rights.

Taking a child-centred stance in relation to the practice indicator for Audience, in this study two categories of audience access were identified. The first is *indirect access to Audience* (via reporting and other adult-mediated communications), and the second is *direct access to Audience* (an opportunity for face-to-face meetings and discussions). Three categories of Audience could be identified in this study. The first is the *Primary Audience*, practitioners and stakeholders directly involved with the fora and their management. The *Secondary Audience* consists of practitioners in social work and social care not directly involved with the fora, and the third is the *External Audiences*, practitioners and other professionals external to the context of children and young people in care in Ireland.



**Table 6: Categories of Audience**

<b>Primary Audience</b>	All stakeholders involved with the fora at both a regional and national level
<b>Secondary Audience</b>	Tusla Management and Social Work Practitioners who are not involved in fora processes
<b>External Audience</b>	Interested parties external to the context of children and young people in care

**Table 7: Categories of Opportunities to Access Audiences**

<b>Direct Audience</b>	International and National Conferences
	Attendance of decision-makers at fora meetings and meetings with local child care teams
<b>Indirect Audience</b>	Formal feedback to regional and national stakeholders as part of the fora operations
	Informal feedback to local social work teams and relevant practitioners who are not involved in the fora

This section will first outline the appropriate audience identified by the young participants, then discuss the nature of access to these audiences in order to reflect on the perception of meaningful participation from the viewpoint of the young people. Finally, the young participants' perception of being heard will be presented.

### **The Appropriate Audience According to Young Participants**

When young people were asked who should listen to what the Foster Care Action Groups had to say, there was a shared perception across the various participants of the fora sampled that social work practitioners should be the primary audience for the views expressed on the challenges experienced throughout the care process, due to their central position as decision-makers in the young people's lives.

*I think the social workers, because everything you do, it gets notified back to the social workers, and they are the ones with the decisions, really. (Young Person Case Area 1)*

*Mainly the social workers. (Young Person Case Area 5)*

The engagement of social work practitioners and decision-makers as an appropriate audience was seen by one stakeholder as being crucial to transformative participation. This was because in the everyday practice of social work, the practitioner views and responds to the young person in care through a legislative and practice-based lens that may limit the young person's ability to express an opinion on the services that they receive.

*We need to be more open and more challenged by what young people are saying to us, and the only way – well, in my view – maybe not the only way, I suppose – I have found the fora is a really powerful way that you can go and perhaps give yourself permission to switch off a bit and just engage with these young people in a different way. Do I think it would change practice? I think if it really took hold and we allowed some of what was said [to] sink in, I think it would, it would have, to be honest. I absolutely believe that fundamentally. (Principal Social Worker)*

EPIC's advocates were also identified by the young people as a key target audience of the fora. This is due to the perception of EPIC as appropriate advocates for their interests that they were considered an important audience, due to their capacity to then represent the views of the fora because of their independent status.

*We need to have Epic on there as well because of the fact that they can actually empower people more. So they'd be up towards the top. (Case Area 3)*

*EPIC worker! (Case Area 1)*

*They're the voice of the young people in care. They reinforce everything, because it's professionals working with professionals; we're not professionals. EPIC workers are a lot nicer than some of Tusla. Because they're all young and they're all like Yo! (Case Area 5)*

Foster parents were also considered an appropriate audience for the work and expressions of challenges faced by the children and young people in care from the fora, due to the potential for shared understanding of the challenges faced by the young people. However, they were not considered a high-priority audience.

*And foster carers as well, we were saying that we have a shared understanding of the words. (Young Participant Case Area 1)*

This demonstrates that the young participants felt that the audience for their views, experiences, and products should be aimed primarily at secondary and external categories of audience, in terms of the impact of social work practitioners and foster carers on their daily lived experience, along with advocates who were identified as allies in support of their best interests.



## Opportunities for Indirect Access to Audiences

Indirect access to Audiences consists of the formal and informal reporting and feedback activities undertaken by practitioners to inform the Primary and Secondary Audiences of the operations and outputs of the fora. Adult stakeholders gave examples of how they were reporting back on issues that arose during the conduct of the forum to the Foster Care Action Group management structures and children in care social work teams consisting of multidisciplinary practitioners and management.

*The regional meetings, yes, yes. And there is a national meeting as well. Now I wouldn't have gone to that, but there is a national meeting as well. It would be literally the key people from each of the forums [...] There would be a variety of not just managers; there would be a variety of services there as well. The other part actually, which I hadn't said, was it's important to keep the social workers up to date as well. Even if it's every five to six months, whatever, just throw out an email saying, 'Oh look', you know? 'The group is still running, this is what is happening', you know? Kind of, so and particularly then the kids who the workers whose kids are attending, just, you know, to keep a general update and say, 'Ah look', you know, 'Johnny is still coming', and you know? (Respondent 8)*

*We have spoken to the social workers individually of the children if we had any concerns about any feedback coming back about the placements, but that is on an individual basis. But this will be the first time for us to roll that out to senior management. (Respondent 2)*

These opportunities for indirect access to primary and secondary audiences served two purposes: reporting back on the progress of the fora, and monitoring the needs and well-being of the young participants in social work teams.

## Opportunities for Direct Access to Audiences

There were also accounts given of efforts to secure direct access to the Primary and Secondary Audiences, at a regional and local level, without the mediation of reporting structures for the young participants. Though this was potentially challenging for the young people, it was seen as an important opportunity to connect practitioners with the views of young people outside of regular care processes related to their personal circumstance.

*Our senior social worker for the children in care. And he's over all the children in care teams; they meet once a month, and like even I suppose the evidence of that is that we are speaking at one of their team meetings in September. And the kids know about it and we actually, we're meeting the group on Friday and we want to ask if anyone would like to come along to that meeting. I don't know if they will; it could be very daunting for them to be with sixty social workers! (Respondent 19)*

*I also think the fora are quite powerful, because I know some of the kids have presented to the social work team and we did that here as well. Now unfortunately the attendance wasn't so great that day, so we'd like to do it again. (Respondent 4)*

Opportunities to network with Primary, Secondary and External Audiences, decision-makers, and child rights advocates, such as the meeting at the office of the Ombudsman for Care Day, constituted a form of direct access. However, it is important to note that these opportunities were most available to those fora in urban areas with the highest level of engagement of decision-makers in the fora processes<sup>DD</sup>. This is an important opportunity because it had the potential to make participation meaningful for some participants, due to the opportunity to receive positive feedback and meet a variety of practitioners whom they viewed as important. This gave them the impression that their participation was important and meaningful.

*They thought we were brilliant. There was a lawyer there. (Young People Case Area 1)*

Direct Access to Audiences was also evidenced in the opportunity to present at various national conferences relating to care and participation. This gave the fora an opportunity to disseminate their opinion to a wider audience of stakeholders than reached by the normal operation of the fora. This access to audiences had an overlapping advantage when it comes to implementing the Lundy model, in that it had the potential to provide the young participants with information and develop their personal capacities.

*They wrote three raps and recorded those with [...] and performed them both at the UCC conference and their Aftercare Conference in Dublin. (Respondent 6)*

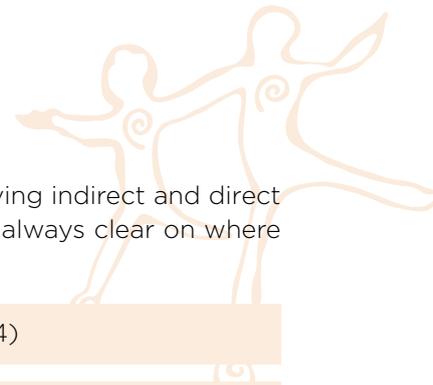
*We have two that are representing our group now on the national fora thing in Athlone, and you know, they're looking forward to going to Athlone and nervous I suppose to see what else is in store for them. They may get some insight into things that they could do in the future. (Respondent 12)*

*They are working on their slideshow that they are going to present at the EPIC conference, you know? There is good information in it, and I suppose the one major outcome is that going into care is a very traumatic business for a young person or a child. (Respondent 5)*

Other fora had the opportunity to send representatives to international conferences and extend the disseminative reach of the group. These opportunities to reach a wider audience had a secondary advantage. They did not just enable the transmission of ideas to a new external audience of peers and practitioners, but also allowed for more information and guidance to be acquired on possible areas of influence on practice and policy gathered from the experience of other jurisdictions. This is a further example in practice of the overlapping, interrelated nature of the four factors outlined in the Lundy model.

*Yeah, we took back, well, for us as a youth board our topic at the moment was aftercare. We took a lot back from what Scotland had, because in Scotland the age for aftercare when it finishes is twenty-five, and when it's here it's twenty-one if you're not in education, but if you're in education it's up until twenty-three. So which is a huge difference, because like even in Scotland you have it even if you're not in education, you still have the aftercare service. (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*So that's a big part of it [...], the lads had gone to [...] Switzerland from here as well, to Children as Actors Transforming Society, which is a bit of a mouthful. Two of the original fora have gone there, one fella has gone for his third year; he came back; he's now on the European committee and panel for this. So of course he passed that on then to the rest of them as well, and to show them how important it is to have your voice heard and children's rights, not only in an Irish context, a European context, but a world context as well. (Respondent 11)*



## Young Participants' Perceptions of Being Heard

Despite being clear on who the appropriate audience for their views are, and having indirect and direct access to a wide variety of audiences, some of the young participants were not always clear on where their products went, or whether their views were being heard.

*It's not really gone to other people though. (Young Participant Case Area 4)*

*Interviewer (IV): Okay, and do you ever hear from those guys, like do they ever send messages to the forum?*

*Young Person (YP): No. They send vouchers to get a hot chocolate. (Young Participants Case Area 2)*

This perception of lack of dissemination or access to audience can be at odds with what adult facilitators report. Feedback processes and awareness of audience seem to have a greater impact when coupled with events and opportunities to meet key decision-makers. One forum, where access to decision-makers and networking events was restricted due to location, had less value placed on the feedback received, evidenced through a perception of a lack of engagement with their audience. This group had to be prompted to think of ways in which they might have heard from their audience, which has implications for the experience of participation as meaningful.

*IV: No? You don't get feedback?*

*IV: So the booklet you did, did you get any feedback?*

*YP: We get feedback on that. (Young Person Case Area 5)*

This may be because access to audiences was sometimes challenging at both a local and national level, particularly in decentralised rural areas. The challenge of convening a meeting outside professional working times and young people's scheduled extracurricular activities and transport requirements, and the centralisation of national organisations, was a factor in this.

*Our young people are going to put a slideshow together, and we are going to meet with senior management. But then you come up with the whole thing of, okay, our young people don't get out of school until 4:00, they are not going to be able to get into [...], by the time we provide transport and get them there, until maybe 6:00 or 6:30. We need our senior management to be agreeable and the other workers to come at 7:00 p.m. and meet these young people. (Respondent 2)*

The challenge in ensuring access to and awareness of audience is crucial to recognising the young people's participation and its effect on their perception of participation in the fora as meaningful. But even if there was an opportunity for a direct audience for the young participants to meet with decision-makers, the outcome of these meetings is dictated by the time and resources required to process information, so some stakeholders are concerned about the perception of influence by the young participants.

*I suppose for a child when they say something is wrong or something needs to change, it never changes quick enough for them. I don't think they understand the whole other side of it. But the fact that they are heard, it has been filtered to the other teams, they have come back to them. I think it's more open for them. I don't know what the word is; I just think it's more transparent, to be honest, that they see that, 'Yeah, I am important, and what I'm saying is important, and people are listening.' And if they say they can't do anything about it, they will say that. Or if they say things will change, we hope to trust the process, that that will happen. But the time limit for things to change is never quick enough for any child. (Respondent 12)*

## 4.2.2 Influence

According to Lundy's (2007) model, the ability of young people to exert influence has two practice requirements. The first is that children's and young people's inputs are given due weight by decision-makers in line with their age and emerging capacities. This means that after consideration, their inputs exert an influence on policy and service provision. The Lundy model also emphasises the importance of providing feedback to young people. This section will discuss the processes and outcomes of the Foster Care Action Groups in relation to the evidence of influence leveraged and the feedback provided to young people.

To reflect on the level of Influence the fora have exerted on service delivery, it is useful to consider the outcomes and outputs of fora operations. Three types of Influence have been identified as part of this study: **direct** (a change to processes or policy), **indirect** (localised reflection and adjustment to practice), and **potential** (a meaningful product or change to process awaiting implementation). Direct influence on practice includes the development of childcare review forms and contact cards for social workers. Indirect influence includes prompts to reflective practice generated through outputs such as creative visual presentations of the varied perspectives of young people about the transition into care, or rap generated by young people in workshops that speak to their feelings of not being listened to. The expression of frustration or anxiety around care processes and procedures has also prompted reflection and small-scale localised tweaks to practice, making processes more child- and youth-friendly. There are also four outputs with the potential to have a direct influence on practice awaiting review and potential implementation: a placement passport, a dictionary of care words, a leaflet of information on file access, and the development of a smartphone app to enhance communication between practitioner and client.



**Table 8: Categories of Influence**

Direct Influence	Indirect Influence	Potential Influence
Child Care Review Forms	Video of Perspectives	Placement Passport
Contact Cards for Social Workers	Rap of Perspectives	Care Words Dictionary
	Reflective practice and visitation	Leaflet of Information: Accessing Our Files
	Reflective practice and child-friendly access or conference space	Development of app to enhance social work and client contact
	Reflective practice and access to social workers	

### Direct Influence on Practice

As a result of a supportive organisational framework for communicating the views of children and young people to decision-makers, one forum had an opportunity to provide input into technical documents used during childcare reviews and a social work contact card as a form of localised direct influence. This was facilitated by key social work decision-makers' continuous engagement with the group, including a recognition process to make the experience of being heard more meaningful.

*If they came up with something that I would give an undertaking that I would deliver on it. So one of the things they came up with was to, one of the things they were very unhappy about in care was just the whole review of their time in care when the social workers came out to review, and they didn't really see themselves as being involved in that or contributing to that. So we said fine, can you develop something? If you develop, we'll implement it. So they developed their own review form and how it should work, and I've put that into the system here in [...]. That was very explicit, and when they produced the form, we had a special day where I went down and they presented it to me and, you know, we had a roundtable discussion on it and, you know, we recognised their input in everything like that, and I think we gave them certificates on the day for their input into it, and told them then that that would now be adopted here as the review form that all children going forward would fill in, you know? (Respondent 14)*

*The review form, now it took ages for us to get that up and running, but [...] the Area Manager, he funded the printing of that. It is a very nice document. But we launched it. So at Christmas about two years ago we went to a hotel, all the young people were invited, [Area Manager] and [Child Care Manager] turned up, they launched the form just with the young people and then went for a meal with them. Big things they were saying is, it is their life, so it needs to work. And we need to help them make it work. (Respondent 1)*

Still, adult stakeholders agreed that there has yet to be any substantive change to service delivery and policy at a national level.

*Now has it impacted on services? Not at this point. (Respondent 15)*

Young participants, however, had altruistic hopes for the influence of their product and the operation of the fora. It was particularly hoped that their products and the expression of their views and experiences would make an impact that would benefit children and young people in care at a national level.

*And we spoke about what we did, and like this isn't going to affect us at all but it's to affect the other young people who are going to come into care. Future children. (Young Person Case Area 5)*

Adult stakeholders confirmed that there is potential for the fora to impact positively on the experience of care, according to practitioners who reflected on the products of their group.

*It is hard to gauge the impact of this, but I think it can be significant. My view maybe in [...] that we produce some useful products, so there have been some outcomes that have been useful, but I think they have been limited in their impact. (Respondent 1)*

### **Indirect Influence on Practice**

In some areas, actionable recommendations or learning from the fora were channelled into localised indirect influence on practice. The group facilitators were flexible in promoting changes in practice that could be more immediate, such as making childcare reviews more child-friendly space in response to information received from the young participants.

*They have changed the access rooms. I was actually talking to the child-in-care reviewer, and we are looking at foods for the child and care review. I forgot about that one. Myself and [...] have done integration work and that is all about calming foods, so lollipops, sucky bottles, crunchy foods if you are feeling angry, popcorn. When you go along to the child-in-care review, there is tea offered to everybody, but 'I don't drink tea.' And there is scones, 'I don't like scones.' 'So what would you want at that table?' So a lot of them are just like, a fruit juice, fruit shoot, they like those winders, chewing them, chewy sweets, sucky sweets, popcorn, crunchy foods. So what they are looking at is maybe putting a wee party bag together of a selection of all of those things. (Respondent 2)*

*Even for myself now just some of the ways, some of the young people have different ideas about how they wanted the review to take place. So I suppose we made changes, do you know? Like they didn't have to be, we obviously encourage them to attend their review, but if they found that it was too daunting, with too many people, what you might do is maybe have them come twenty minutes early and maybe meet with them, myself and the team leader, before we meet anyone else. Small little changes like that that just makes it a little less anxiety for them, you know? (Respondent 9)*

*[...] had a session where the Principal Social Worker came in and she sat around and all the kids asked her questions and she was amazed by the questions that they came up with. She said, 'So your social workers didn't talk to you about that?' and they said no. So she went back and said, 'Why are my social workers not visiting children?' One of the kids also asked about placement moves or what situation can she be kicked out at. So she's going back going, 'Why do these children think when they're in long-term placements that they're still not permanent? What can we do to make these children feel permanency?' That's an outcome. (Respondent 6)*



Some adult stakeholders reported that the feedback on processes received from the young people was beneficial to a secondary audience of practitioners not attached to the fora and allowed them the opportunity to address localised issues in practice.

*It gives us, as Tusla staff members and maybe members of our partners in the voluntary and community sector, an opportunity I suppose to hear from young people around, you know, some of the difficulties or experiences they may experience and also feed that back to our colleagues. So I think there's been lots of opportunities for, you know, even small little issues that came up, we were able to feed that back to our wider colleagues within Tusla and make some changes in terms of that. (Respondent 17)*

Some of the young participants hoped that interactions with staff as part of the forum operations and views of their product would have an impact on how social workers viewed them. To this end, one forum produced a video piece that aims to prompt reflection on the very personal experience of the care process. They were appreciative of having their feelings about challenges experienced throughout the care process recognised by staff at a conference. This shows that indirect influence, that is, reflection on practice prompted by positive interactions, could be very beneficial for the young people in their experience of corporate parenting.

*You know, if it hopefully makes a change and stuff. Cos if like they see us in a totally different way, I don't know...Yeah, there was a few people there and they were like crying, and so was I. (Young Participants Case Area 4)*

The opportunity to prompt reflection in social work practitioners on the experiences of children in care outside of procedural spaces was valued by one young participant at a conference, who felt that service delivery and the experiences of youth in care could be improved by spending time listening to young people in care.

*That's a point I brought up as well, because I'd to speak on behalf of the children in foster care but I kind of did it in my own way, sort of helping young people express their own voice. So I kind of put a question to them, to the social workers and people who were there saying like if you were in our shoes, how you would feel if you were in that situation? And like that kind of, that got them thinking then. (Young Participant Case Area 3)*

## **Potential influence**

A range of documents were produced by the young people, with the support of their fora facilitators, that have the potential to be very useful in addressing challenges in the care process experienced by children and young people. Four outputs produced by young people in the fora under study are currently under review at national level in Tusla: a placement passport, a dictionary of care words, a leaflet of information on file access, and the development of a smartphone app to enhance communication between practitioner and client. Because review and implementation through the mediation of the Regional Working Groups and National Oversight Group take time, final decisions had not been made on mainstreaming these outputs at the time of writing.

## The Limits of Influence and the Challenges to Implementation

One stakeholder described how, even when the products and recommendations of a particular forum are deemed actionable, the legal, procedural, and policy requirements associated with mainstreaming can result in delays and roadblocks. This stakeholder took the view that the development of communication structures directly between national policy levels and the fora may help to expedite this.

*Because I sit at the national table, so I know that when you bring those issues back in at the national table, the discussion is a bit more complex, because people have to be aware of how we can make sure that any change is consistent with regulation, with standards, will stand up to scrutiny ... when it comes back to the decision-makers, we do what we are good at, we start stripping it away. 'We can't do that, we can't do that, we couldn't do that, we need to get legal advice on that.' I understand all that, I absolutely do, but I think the challenge for us is to be a little bit braver, and I think the way we get braver is when you engage with someone and you eyeball them, it is harder to walk away. (Respondent 1)*

Other stakeholders spoke of the importance of making young people aware that there may be limits to the influence on service delivery and policy that a forum can exert, particularly in the arena of child protection and welfare. There was an awareness from some young participants that while they could suggest change, there was a reliance on adult stakeholders to implement them.

*Now that hasn't happened yet, but I mean that would be fed back to them very honestly and an explanation as to why, do you know what I mean? But I think there are obviously going to be situations sometimes where we can't do, particularly maybe where we're bound by law, where it's just not negotiable, and we're going to have to say to the kids, 'No, actually we can't do that one.' Then we're going to have to manage if they're very angry about that, just manage that piece. It's not something we can change, necessarily. But also, that won't necessarily be a negative experience for them, because that will be about, that's a bit like life. Some stuff you can't. Do you know what I mean? (Respondent 4)*

*And Tusla, no any one person in Tusla can make a final decision. It's all done as teams like, and they can't just turn around and one person in Tusla tomorrow turn around and say, 'Oh yeah, go ahead in that.' It all has to be run through and it has to be signed off, like principal social workers, they're told discuss it. (Young Person Case Area 5)*

The process of feedback was felt to be important in relation to the potential or actual *limits of influence* that the young people can exert, due to legislative and procedural reasons. In one case, this allowed the social work team to recognise the challenges faced by young people and to instigate practice initiatives to improve the relationships with social workers through planned activities, even if the desired influence was not actionable.

*You come to my house, you want to see my room, you want to ... I have to get Garda clearance if I want to sleep over; you're the person that makes, tells me when I'm going to be meeting my parents or my family and, do you know what I mean? And for them to see social workers in a different light, and for social workers to just relax and stand back and just let the kids be kids, and you'll see a lot more of them just going out and ... because when you go out to see kids, it's an agenda. There's a reason you're going out to see them, and it's never just for just 'How are you doing?' And I suppose on the back of that fora that we have done, we would have brought back that message to the children-in-care teams, with the result that they have now organised outings for kids in care. (Respondent 19)*



It is evident from one young person's account that direct access to an audience of decision-makers led him or her to believe that young people have limited influence on decision-making. When asked whether Tusla takes the views of the forum on board, this young person's response was:

*Well, I can't say yes, because of the fact of what happened at the last conference last year. The last conference was for, us as a panel of youth board, we had a load of questions for the panel. There was like TDs, there was, Tusla were there as well - high-up people, let's just say. And in that we gave them a load of questions, and we were specifically focusing on Tusla. They'd no clue what we were talking about whatsoever. They were never prepared; they didn't answer anything that we had. From what I remember, one of them was about finding money to put into the aftercare system, because like Tusla are specifically meant to allocate money for people in aftercare. And there was nothing being done about it, and they were really putting it into mainly themselves; they weren't sort of sectioning it for each category, for residential care, the foster care, the aftercare, the workers and stuff like that. And like Tusla weren't, they weren't sort of, it was like they weren't even bothered. So that's why I'm saying no to that. (Young Participant Case Area 3)*

This experience highlights that the participation of young people can result in a sense of dissatisfaction when they perceive that their agenda is not given consideration by those audiences who have the power to make decisions in their lives.

### **Feedback Mechanisms**

In the Lundy model checklist, feedback processes are crucial in guarding against tokenistic practices, as they ensure that key decision-makers have to reflect on the views expressed by the young people and give them due weight in line with their age and maturity. Feedback mechanisms built into the fora operations included reporting, whereby the young participants would have a record of proceedings or any communications and requests for information requested by them returned.

*They get feedback from what has happened so that they're not just giving us the information and then nothing happens, and they've always commented on that as well. (Respondent 12)*

Feedback is deemed important by facilitators as beneficial for the young people involved, whether the result was no change in practice or the operation of the fora or successful influence of policy or practice.

*They don't feel as disaffected, because they identified the review forms not having the information of the social worker, and something changed. There was cause and effect. (Respondent 6)*

*Yeah, and any time that they have said, 'Will you bring that back?'; we have, and either a team leader or the principal social worker will come to the next fora to talk to them. (Respondent 19)*

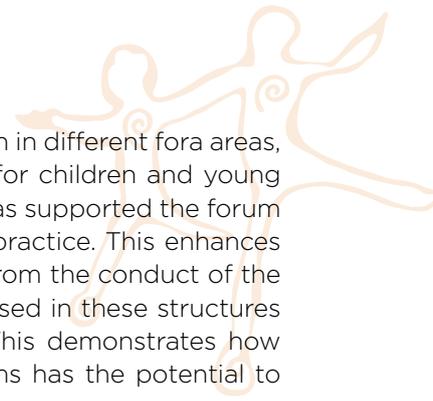
*Being able to go back and be like, 'Well I actually, you know, followed through on what I said the last time', do you know? 'I listened to what you said, I brought it back to my team, team were very surprised by certain things and, you know, it's bringing about changes.' So I suppose they felt that they were listened to, you know? (Respondent 9)*

## Relational and Situational Factors that Affect Influence

It is important to note that the group dynamics of any particular forum can affect its operations (Horwath et al., 2011). The particular outputs or focus of a given forum depends on the group of participants in any particular area and the nature of their shared experiences. For example, while many of the fora worked on specific outputs designed to change work practices and service delivery, as described above, one forum decided that the provision of a social space for children and young people in care was to be the focus of their efforts. This was because a stigma-free space that is '*not awkward*' was considered very important to them. This demonstrates the impact of group dynamics: as young people set the agenda in the forum in response to collective concerns, the potential for any forum to influence service or policy provision depends on area-contingent factors arising from the wishes of the young people at a local level and the support available to them from the adult facilitators.

Situational factors and relational factors further influenced the fora operations in that engagement from practitioners and decision-makers differed among fora areas. The engagement of key social work practitioners and decision-makers with the individual fora is key to allowing young people to influence service provision in their local area. In one forum area, a lack of social work presence in the planning and operation of the forum led to the issue of child care review documents and process formats, which had been dealt with by two other fora, being seen as an unactionable project, even though there was a feeling that their participation rights are not being met.

*But ... reviews came up, the whole system, reviewing of care plans and that whole process and filling up these stupid forms that they had to fill up. And then going to a meeting where it was already decided before you went in anyway, you know. They seemed fairly okay about accepting that reviews are things that need to happen, they have never been nice things, there is no way of making them nice, they are what they are. We feel that if we do want something changed, that we can tell our foster carer or our social worker or somebody, and we had that represented. We accepted that is the process, that is what it is, it is not going to change in any way that is going to make it better or make it a nice thing to be going to, it is what it is. So they kind of felt there is no point, you can't really do anything to improve it. It is as good as it is going to get. (Respondent 18)*



There are other examples of how the implementation of practice has slight variation in different fora areas, depending on situational factors. In some areas the implementation of a forum for children and young people in care has coincided with the development of practice in the area which has supported the forum to have their voices heard up to management level and prompted reflection on practice. This enhances the transmission of viewpoints and the consideration of actionable items arising from the conduct of the fora. The support and engagement of key decision-makers with the views expressed in these structures is important to this process and to the implementation of recommendations. This demonstrates how developing systemic lines of communication and response in governance systems has the potential to promote the influence of the fora (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012).

*What we have had up to now is a general area management team that would have child protection, PPFS, children in care. But I think there was a decision recently that we needed to have a particular forum where issues relating to children in care could actually be brought to a management level on a monthly basis. I think for me, and I would have said this was maybe a gap of the fora, I think you need that kind of a forum where issues that are generated in the fora, so young people talked about issues around reviews, around access, around contact with social work, around how ill-prepared they feel sometimes for coming into care or moving. So they are really important issues, and how they express those is really powerful, but they are of little use if they only end up on a document on somebody's desk. So the next step is to take those issues into something like the area management team and say, okay, how do we start changing policies or procedures or developing practice via training that means social workers are much more aware of those issues and perhaps become a little bit more sensitive to how they do their business. (Respondent 1)*

### 4.3 Summary of Findings

The perception of the provision of a safe space for the young people in care to transmit their views to Tusla management and decision-makers was facilitated through relational and situational factors. The relational factors included peer support provided by a community of shared experience, which is an important component of a safe space, given the potential stigma that young people in care fear will arise if they disclose their unique experience as looked-after children in the general population. The development of supportive relationships with trusting adults was facilitated through team-building activities, as part of the general operation of the fora and as one-off events. These included visits to adventure centres, eating meals out, and fora traditions such as games, ice-breakers, and pizza. The situational factors which contribute to the development of these supportive relationships included the operation of this model of participation over time as an evolving process, in a youth-led, informal format which differed significantly from other participation opportunities that young people in care might have. The ratio of youth to adult was higher, and this, along with the relaxed, informal environment actively promoted by adult facilitators, increased the feeling of security.

The young participants were facilitated in the expression of their views by the supportive relationships with their peers and facilitators, demonstrating an overlap between the factors of space and voice. It is important to note here that the young participants felt safe to express their views through the non-judgmental and supportive stance of the adult facilitators. In addition, there were a number of situational factors that promoted their voice arising from the practice of the facilitators of the fora. These were the adherence to participation principles, such as the provision of information and guidance, and commitment to allowing the young participants to set the agenda of the fora. Time is another overlapping factor here, as the young participants needed time to digest information and reflect on their experiences and the possibility of informing practice.

With regard to the requirement of access to key decision-makers as part of the audience factor of Lundy's (2007) model, indirect access is provided through inbuilt reporting structures of the general operation of the fora. Opportunities for a direct audience with decision-makers and social work practitioners also occurred as part of the fora operations, as a response to requests for information and through networking events such as the conferences or international events. However, while all adult stakeholders were aware of reporting and feedback activities, it was not always clear to the young participants who was listening to them in some fora areas. In areas with direct access to primary audiences and the experience of recognition processes, the processes of decision-making were better understood, and the young participants reported feelings of empowerment.

With regard to the practice requirement of Influence, there was evidence of some localised direct changes to process documents arising from the work of the fora. There was also evidence of indirect influence on social work practice at a local level, primarily concerning small tweaks to practice prompted by practitioner reflection and response. There is evidence to suggest that influence is both promoted and constrained by the engagement of practitioners in any given forum, highlighting the benefits of a collaborative, interagency approach and the engagement of social work practitioners in the fora. No evidence of impact at national level was found; however, a range of outputs from the fora were awaiting review and potentially broader implementation at national level.

# 5



## Perspectives on the Benefits and Challenges associated with the Collective Model of Participation

The first part of this section reflects on the perceived benefits of Foster Care Action Group participation for the young people in care and for Tusla. The second part outlines the challenges to implementation as highlighted by stakeholders and young participants.

### 5.1 Benefits

This discussion focuses first on the personal benefits accrued to the young participants, such as social support, the development of a positive identity, and personal efficacy. Next, it outlines the access to information and guidance that helps them to navigate and understand the care process in a manner that is supplemental to the general access of social work services. Importantly, the collective nature of the participatory initiative provides for the identification of shared challenges that might not have been addressed in individual opportunities, due to the imbalance of power between young people and adults and the focus on welfare in those processes. Secondly, the discussion of benefits from implementation of the Tusla and EPIC Fora for Tusla will include consideration of the value of interagency collaboration and the development of new ways of working, the identification of challenges that may be addressed to improve service delivery, and the potential to provide an alternative space where positive interactions with social work staff outside of formal social work practices can enhance the development of interpersonal relationships of support.

#### 5.1.1 Benefits for the Young Participants

##### **Social Support and Positive Identity**

The benefits of participation related to social and peer support that was available to them, as part of the fora participation, was of key importance to the young people taking part in the research. The experience of care is something that can result in feelings of difference and isolation. Many young people fear stigma, and the fora gives them a place to be social where this is not an issue, due to the groups' constitution of a community of shared experience

*I can't talk to anyone in my school about my foster care, because there's only one or two people in foster care in my school, and like I can't go around saying stuff about my Ma and Da, like if it makes me upset a bit, because my Ma and Da have been, I've been in foster care since I was three, and I've been in care like thirteen years now, and like I felt like everyone else is like different to me. (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*They understand you, like, and it's really nice, cos like, I only have one person to talk to outside of this group, and I feel really bad if I open up too much, in case I scare them away or something, and then but like it's nice to have a load of people to open up to that like you trust to open up to. Sometimes they are going through the same thing as you are. (Young Person Case Area 4)*

*I think it's really like important, because like it's interesting what EPIC can do for you. Like, I joined [the forum] and not only did I make like really good friends, it's kind of an opportunity for you to feel like you're not by yourself. You know, you have your foster family, some people get on with them, some people don't. I do, like. So it's not like I'm alone, but like there's no one in school in foster care. I can't sit down and rant to anyone, because they don't get it like, whereas when I come here, like, I hate everything, and they understand completely. (Young Person Case Area 3)*

Despite the fact that the young people often felt uncomfortable talking about being in care in their day-to-day lives, due to concerns around stigmatisation, practitioners reported that the fora members developed a positive sense of identity. This arose through engagement with the fora, their inputs into practice, and the supportive relationships formed with their peers.

*They felt really stigmatised, they really felt that they were so different from their peers, and they felt that real sense of shame about being in care; care or a young person in care. And then a year later, we said, 'That was your big issue; is it still your issue?' And they were like, no. No I don't. And I think that was one of the things about being part of that collective. (Respondent 6)*

*That group has actually supported them to be proud to be in care, which was extremely ... When we were trying to find a name to name the group, Fostered and Proud was the name that they had come up with. (Respondent 2)*

Opportunities to interact with others in the same situation helped normalise their perception of self in relation to being in care and promoted positive self-identity. The sense of belonging and pride felt by members of two fora prompted the young participants to design group hoodies to demonstrate their membership of the fora.

*On the day of the conference, they all wore the hoodies, you know, and it was like going, it was their identity. It was like, 'This is our group', you know. You think they'd be dying for opportunities to not look the same, but they actually kind of really, you know, sort of relief in being part of a little club, you know. And for our Christmas celebration then, you know, which was just honouring all the stuff they'd done and reward them, you know, presentations for tickets and stuff like that, they actually wore the hoodies again. There was no uniform requirement, but the meaning was essentially identity; it was their group, their club, you know. (Respondent 12)*

*The group last year or two years ago that we started the, they're still in contact, they've opened up their own web page there, identified as themselves, you know. At one stage they asked me would I buy them hoodies, you know, they all have a hoodie that represents to them being part of that group, because they felt such a close bond, you know? And even though some of them have aged out now, they still retain an awful lot of contact. (Respondent 14)*



There are examples of how participation in the forum helped put the care process into perspective and aided with emotional processing, along with the general understanding of the value of care processes for some young participants in this supportive environment.

*When he came to the group, he met another young boy who had moved here from (another country) under horrible circumstances and is now in care and would be very grateful to be in care. So when that little boy told his story in the group, not all of it but part of his story, it actually supported [...] to realise that okay, sometimes young people need to go into care for reasons that their social workers are right, and it is not the case that everybody hates being in care. (Respondent 2)*

*And I started to cry, like. We were just so angry, because before [the forum] we didn't talk to anyone about that. So we went to [the forum] and we literally just let it all out, like. (Young Person Case Area 3)*

## Personal Development

Involvement in the fora was seen to be very beneficial in terms of personal capacities and skills development for some young participants. This is evident in some young participants' accounts of engagement with advocacy activities and stakeholder accounts of voluntary engagement with the improvement of social work processes.

*Literally like I feel like a superhero when I come in here, because people listen to us, like EPIC listens to us, and we have, we feel like we can actually, we're getting somewhere, like. One day we'll make a change. (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*I know [the forum] has helped me with like loads of different things. I used to suffer with really bad social anxiety, anxiety in general. I still have anxiety, but it's not that bad, but like before [the forum] I couldn't get on a bus by myself; I'd be too scared. I'd be nervous, like. I have to tell the busman where I'm going, stuff like that. And since EPIC I've gone to the Ombudsman and spoke to him; I'd follow him for the day. [At] the last conference I was introducing everyone, stuff like that. I wouldn't be able to do that if I didn't have the experience of having [the forum]. (Young Person Case Area 3)*

*"One of the girls who actually chose to be the backup person had come on leaps and bounds in her placement, unreal. She would have been extremely quiet and very disengaged, and now within the group she has actually put herself forward with the social department in Donegal Town and she is helping them design the children-in-care review room and their access room. (Respondent 2)*

*I think the fact that they had done the conference together was a really big plus, and that was something they were really proud of. They were really nervous about it, and a lot of them weren't sure that they'd do it or not, but that whole achievement sense after they had done it, and being proud of the fact that they had done it. (Respondent 17)*

Even if the work produced by the fora did not directly benefit the young people themselves, altruistic motivation was evident in accounts. This is seen to be a factor in positive social and emotional development through the experience of helping others.

*IV: What about the dictionary itself, what would you hope that that might achieve? You have made this dictionary now, and you have told people about it, and you are hoping people will get a copy of it when it is printed. What would you like to happen if people have that dictionary?*

*They don't have to ask more questions about it. (Young Person, Case Area 1)*

*It's not just changes for themselves but changes for younger people who were coming behind them, and they always commented on that as well, said sometimes 'It might be a bit late for us to have things changed, but we want the change for the generation that are coming behind us.'* (Respondent 11)

*The older group are acting as mentors to the newer group. So we have an event there a couple of weeks ago where we brought the new group and the older group together, and it was kind of pretty amazing really to see that working. Them giving the younger ones advice about how to best engage with your social worker. (Respondent 6)*

According to facilitators, the opportunity to engage with a common cause and give back to their community of shared experience is seen to have benefits for the young people. Participation in the fora could support the development of positive identity through engagement with their community of shared experience through the emerging evidence of personal capacities demonstrated in altruistic helping and the production of useful information.

*Just because they've been in care doesn't define their life. They will achieve in lots of other ways going forward, and care will be a part of their life and a part of their history, but it doesn't define them. (Respondent 17)*

### **Access to Practical Support and Information**

While the fora provide a space where challenges in the experience of the care process may be uncovered, the fora also have the potential to act as an entry point into other services and supports for carers and young people to gain information in a manner that is supplemental to scheduled social work supports. Even if this additional benefit of fora membership is not availed of immediately, it may be that the contacts made prove beneficial over time.

*Being part of the group that allows them access maybe to advocacy, to find out about is there other supports available to them in terms of their cultural identity and stuff like that. That's been an interesting piece, you know, carers coming back to you going, 'Look, is this coming up for a young person, is there any chance you could know anyone that might do this?' kind of stuff. (Respondent 12)*

*The strange thing is one of those girls has just rang me; she now wants me to advocate for her, even though she's nineteen at this stage. She's coming into the office shortly, but she still remembers the fora, so it did make an impact on her as well, even though she left, you know? (Respondent 11)*



Access to information and guidance may support the young participants to understand more challenging aspects of the care experience outside of formal processes and procedures or in a context of scarce social work resources. This is due to the time available to help young participants understand their situation and the exposure to different experiences in a safe environment with the support of trusted adults to aid reflection on experience.

*If you were fighting with your parents or something, and you didn't know if you were right or they were wrong and stuff like that, and we come here and then you ask them because they are actual social workers, so they can help. (Young Participant Case Area 1)*

*Cos a lot of time they make snap decisions, and you're left there kind of in limbo, though ... so you don't know why decisions are made ... Yeah, and ye don't know what benefits there are, it's like okay, now you're moving, why, d'ye know, or things like that. (Young Participant Case Area 4)*

*They had different questions that they couldn't get their head around, why social workers were doing different things, and some of them were like permission to travel and stuff like that, and things about them feeling kind of frustrated with having to get permission and a letter to kind of leave the country, that they felt kind of a bit, you know, one person said that they felt imprisoned, you know? So they wanted clarity around that, and unfortunately some of the things, I suppose we would have explained that, you know, that is a legality, you know? And because they are in care and that's some of the reasons why they feel kind of vindicated. I can understand where they are coming from. (Respondent 9)*

The child- and youth-friendly format allows for children and young people to ask questions in a timely manner or seek support for issues that affect them. This is a benefit for the young participants, given the regularity of contact with fora facilitators outside of formalised care processes where the young people might not have felt comfortable asking for information and guidance.

*It's more relaxed, it's the whole set-up of it. And they know that what they say, I don't know whether they have trust in us, I think they do have trust in us, that what they say, and when we say we'll bring something back, that they trust that we do bring it back. And that we will have an answer for them from the teams then. So I think they're heard more from the fora group than in reviews. (Respondent 19)*

## **Identification of Common Challenges**

For the young participants, peer support and the identification of common challenges was seen to be beneficial in addressing challenges faced on a personal level, as well as on an altruistic level. Identifying and addressing the challenging experiences of care that can be improved upon may not be possible in the adult-dominated individual opportunities for participation, where power differentials between young people and adult stakeholders and their dependency on adults for service delivery may inhibit the expressions of concerns. For example, the expression of frustration with social work services is something that was facilitated through group dynamics, and a perception of validation arose from shared experience. Time constraints and lack of follow-up from social work on issues that were important to the young people

were identified as common challenges that resulted in frustration, albeit with understanding that resource constraints and necessary prioritisation of needs causes this issue. This is of critical importance, as one research forum reported a lack of social work support for all young people in attendance, with potentially negative consequences for the young people.

*Because like their dates and their times and their meetings are just everywhere. I'm quite sure a lot of people could agree on this point.*

*This month I've missed access, because we, the date they had, we didn't know, so no one turned up. And then our social worker, she was away, and she was asking us, she rang, and she was like, 'Why weren't you at access?' and we were like, 'How were we meant to know access was on, like?' And we're not getting access now this month because we missed that one.*

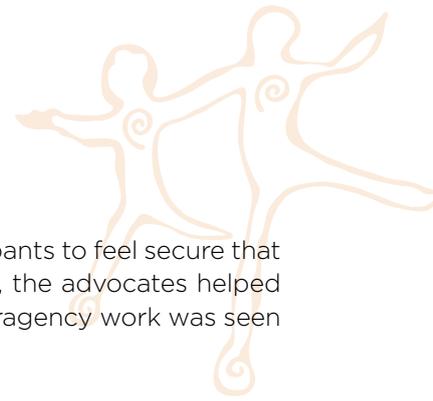
*There's not enough of them. (Case Area 5)*

*Oh yeah, like sometimes when I ring my social worker, she doesn't answer the phone and she doesn't get back to me. (Case Area 2)*

The discovery of shared challenges in relation to the care process through collective participation facilitates the expression of views among the young people. And because it also provides the basis of actionable projects undertaken by the fora, this was beneficial for the development of personal capacity arising from group processes.

*Definitely. You feel alone before the group kind of thing. So like, say if I felt I wanted to see my father, but I wasn't in a group, like I can't do anything about it. We've done something about it as a group. (Young Participant Case Area 3)*

*The way they support each other as a group to communicate, the way they feel permission to actually identify, the way they're given permission also to voice what they're saying without fear of annoying the social worker or getting into trouble. It's very, very, it's very difficult to say to a young person, if you've a problem, speak to your social worker on a one-to-one basis, especially about kind of like, okay, apart from the fact that like about stuff like I haven't seen my brothers and sisters, I'm not happy that I didn't get invited to my last review. As a group, as a collective, it is more, it's a more supportive environment. (Respondent 6)*



## 5.1.2 Benefits for Tusla

### Interagency Collaboration

Tusla's collaboration with EPIC, given its independent stance, helped young participants to feel secure that their issues would be addressed with the help of their advocates; and conversely, the advocates helped the young participants to understand the processes of social work. Therefore, interagency work was seen to be beneficial by practitioners.

*The young people really identify with EPIC, and some of them would know EPIC workers already. (Respondent 1)*

*Like, he's an advocate, he's an advocacy worker? Like, you can tell him anything and he'll get it sorted for you, and things like that, like, or he'll contact your social workers and things like that, like. They help. (Young Participant Case Area 4)*

The presence of EPIC staff on the fora served as a counterbalance to social work involvement in the fora. As discussed earlier, the young participants often felt dissatisfied with social work services. Because of challenges experienced in engaging with social work services, such as high turnover in staff or lack of follow-through on requested actions by the young people, some expressed ambivalence about social work engagement with the fora.

*Like, if they get involved, they'll make everything serious. Cos it's like the one thing that's not about them, really. It's not that they don't care. Yeah, social workers think that they know what you're going through, but they don't, like. (Young People Case Area 2)*

For social work and social care practitioners, the interagency collaboration facilitated new ways of working with young people that helped develop trusting relationships through their positive partnership with independent advocates, who were viewed as allies by the young participants.

*I think that benefited the young people, because I think when they see us working well together, you know, they're more confident in the process. (Respondent 17)*

*[EPIC] made it very much a young-person-centred ... now we would all be the same, don't get me wrong, she brought very good skills in terms of ice-breakers and her experience in working with young people, getting them at ease, you know, stuff that we might be slightly more uptight with. The outcome is very much focused on them. There was no opportunity for us to sway anything or to be too uptight. (Respondent 5)*

*I know as a social worker I have got upset at times when other people say we need somebody to speak on behalf of the child. And I am like, that is what I do. And I do, but I do it in a very particular way and a very necessary way. But I do think for us to really change and listen to children, I think we have to rethink how we do that. And fora are a fantastic way, but I would like to go for broke. I do think children having advocates as opposed to social workers or guardians, or as well as, is something well worth considering. (Respondent 1)*

The balance of professional skills and knowledge as well as their practice related positioning to the young people in care was productive in terms of the collaboration. For example, the involvement of EPIC in one area was seen as key to enabling a project, where it was felt that a particular narrative of social work practice could be challenged in relation to a potentially actionable area of concern and interest to the young participants.

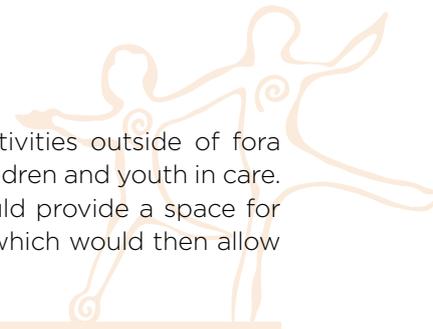
*We were talking in the groups that day, and two of the social workers that were actually on the working group were in the group, and they were saying, 'Oh no, you can't access your files until you're eighteen.' Yes, you can, but that's a narrative that has been like just adopted as fact. So when young people are challenging that, that's when the fora works really, really well. But it requires a number of things. It requires a really strong collaborative, mutually agreeable in terms of my perception and practice of, in participation is similar to the working group and that we've a clear line of communication. (Respondent 6)*

### **Positive Social Interactions and Relational Social Work**

There was also reflection on the possibility of fora participation to have an influence on the young participants' perception of social workers, with potential to enhance further positive interactions outside of the fora processes. Very often the interactive opportunities between young person and social worker are confined to child protection and welfare processes, which young people may experience as challenging. Opportunities for positive social interactions in the fora may help address this issue.

*It does change their attitude towards social workers. I know a few of the social workers have said to me that the children make comments to them like, 'Oh, you are actually more human than I thought.' And things like that, quite humorous things. They see a different side to the social worker, and I think that helps build relationships, because they don't see them as 'You are my social worker', they might to start to see them as people, and the social workers will tend to be a bit more relaxed, and I think that is very helpful. (Respondent 3)*

*A lot of our role in listening to young people gets mediated through regulations, through legislation, through standards. Sometimes a young person talks to us in our social work role, we are listening, but we are also filtering all the time. That has been my strong experience. So I think a lot of young people feel very frustrated, because they never quite feel listened to. I think with the fora, I think we have a little bit of permission to step outside of that and simply listen to what young people are saying. We don't have to mediate it for a review or a report or for anything else, it is simply a space where we can actually listen to young people. (Respondent 1)*



This reflection has prompted social work practitioners to engage in further activities outside of fora operations aimed at promoting positive interactions between practitioners and children and youth in care. If the operation of the forum were expanded on, one practitioner thought it could provide a space for social workers to interact with children and young people outside of procedure, which would then allow for reflective practice.

*I know we would have kind of expanded that, which is separate to the fora, but we would have had a Christmas party for the kids in foster care here over the last couple of years, and that's another thing, I suppose that, you know, just even to have different interactions with the kids. (Respondent 8)*

*I as a social worker and social work manager, I am sitting there listening to that, and I know the hundred reasons why that might be the case, but I think something happens when you switch that bit of your brain off and just listening to the experience. [...] I have found the fora is a really powerful way that you can go and perhaps give yourself permission to switch off a bit and just engage with these young people in a different way. (Respondent 1)*

*I mean I've seen social workers come along to the review and have been fundamentally changed as a result of working in the fora groups, that have come along absolutely terrified of trying to be the nicest, the best, and then at the end of the day they're like: That was amazing. This is the way we should work with children. Because the circumstances were created where they were just there, the kids were there; we were all in it together, it was our job to get to know each other, to get through the day, to really speak to each other, to really hear what we're saying, and that was all we had to do. (Respondent 6)*

## 5.2 Challenges to implementation

Several challenges to the implementation of the collective model of participation were identified by the young participants and adult stakeholders. These can be grouped into the following categories. Firstly, young people's recruitment and ensuring ongoing attendance in the Foster Care Action Groups was found to be challenging. Numbers in attendance remained low, even in large catchment areas. Secondly, organisational resources, particularly time resources, had the potential to affect practitioner engagement with the fora, with implications for participatory practice in this model. Furthermore, ensuring universal access in a context of child protection and welfare is not always possible; more attention needs to be paid to this issue, given the potential benefits accruing from participation for the young people, for both personal reasons and the potential for improved service delivery. Ensuring meaningful influence was identified as an area to be developed. Finally, given the challenges in implementation identified here, ensuring fora sustainability will require reflection and planning.

### Young People's Recruitment and Attendance

For the young people, time to attend with the pressures of school, social, and familial life and extracurricular activity was seen to be a potential barrier to participation. Dependence on others to ensure their participation could also prove challenging for young people's participation. The transport required where there is a large geographical area to be traversed is an example of this, as is the reliance on social workers, social care workers, and other facilitators for accompaniment to events and meetings. This issue is more acute in rural or decentralised forum areas.

*Times, days. Not many people want to give up their Saturdays, like. People have courses, school, jobs. It's not just the individual child – you have to look around the family, too. Who is going to take them to the bus? Who is going to pick them up from the bus? (Young Participant Case Area 5)*

*It's kinda hard with school and everything, though. It's a bit, if like they put it on a certain day, you know like if you have football you have training every, nearly every Saturday, and people make themselves dedicated to going to it. (Young Participant Case Area 2)*

This was a challenge that practitioners took active steps to overcome, with implications for access to time and financial resources.

*Myself and [...] have been looking at grouping some of our children together, and we have been quite keen to get that up and running. But it is difficult here in [...], because we are so widespread. (Respondent 2)*

*[EPIC] went above and beyond, like, even I'd say it was very frustrating for them around transport, getting young people too. I know it's very practical, but it's very annoying and time-consuming in terms of getting young people there, because I know the foster carers had difficulties at different times to get the young people to the fora, you know? And I know that took a lot of time for [...] and [...] and even myself at different times to kind of get them transported. (Respondent 9)*

*The four of us would have divided ourselves out and would have [...] to try and encourage them to come to the group if it wasn't feasible for their foster carers. [...] would have supported foster carers with taxis, we would have paid for taxis to get them to the group. (Respondent 2)*



Recruitment was an issue that was found to be challenging. In one area this challenge was compounded by lack of infrastructure.

*They would go off and find out a list of all those children that were in care. Now that actually transpired to be a difficult enough thing to do, because there wasn't the proper system in place for recording that information, and some of the information wasn't recorded accurately: there was wrong dates, or it wasn't updated, and kids weren't in the foster place, and it said they were on the paperwork that was being held. So that turned out to be quite a big piece of work. (Respondent 4)*

*There's a big cohort in [...], and we sent out hundreds of invitations. We sent out an individual invitation to every young child in care in the age group thirteen to seventeen, we sent out a letter to their foster carer and we sent out a letter to their social worker. Now we got seventeen people turned up on the day. (Respondent 1)*

This is an issue that warrants attention, especially given the fact the turnout for the meetings remains relatively low relative to the number of children in care in any particular area. This may be tied to challenges relating to the geographical location of the fora, access to transport, and time resources when extracurricular activities and access are taken into consideration.

*We wrote out to about seventy or eighty young people who came in that catchment area ... between twelve and seventeen ... we got a total of fourteen, I think, on day one. Now a lot of the reasons was that people had athletics on a Saturday, and some people lived very far away, and foster carers are commuting them in and out of [...] for access maybe twice a week, and then to come again on a Saturday ... We only ended up with about six to eight in our group, so even out of that fourteen that we tried to hold on to, it has just been dripping and dripping, and I think it is to do with geographically, how huge [...] I actually is. That would be the only downfall for me, the numbers, we only got fourteen or fifteen I think to start with. (Respondent 2)*

The young participants in one area felt that recruitment strategies needed to be improved, because participation as described in the information leaflet seemed very serious.

*I think if ye were to do another group, I would like not advertise, but to make it sound better, cos it came across a bit serious ... yeah, so serious ... It was much different than I thought it would be like ... I'm really glad - I don't know what I'd do if I didn't go, like. (Young Participants Area 4)*

## Organisational Resources

Time resources were a significant theme in relation to the operation of the fora from the practitioners' perspectives in terms of level of commitment required, workload burden, and operational challenges. A considerable level of commitment was required by facilitators to ensure that the fora operated without interrupting important yearly events for the young people or in meeting logistical requirements.

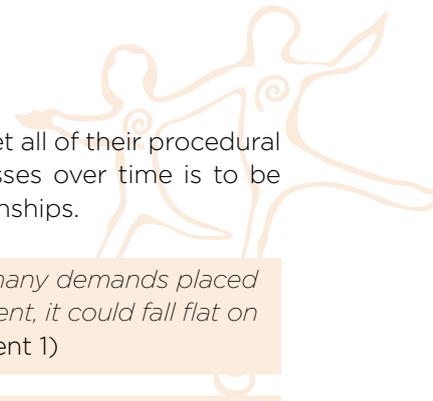
*We were thinking maybe ten or eleven months, but I suppose as it went on we just found that they were kind of natural delays. It wasn't like it was like an unnecessary delay. Just different delays in terms of what kind of piece we were going to do, and kind of trying to get young people, their commitment to meet, I suppose, because I suppose young people in Junior Cert cycle and Leaving Cert cycle. So it was just difficult to get times and everyone and even ourselves as well, to try and just get, agree on a time, you know? (Respondent 9)*

*It's challenging, because we had to pick up the young people and facilitate the, you know. To be fair to management they approved travel and removed any obstructions to progressing the thing, where we were allowed to go and collect the young people, and we were given whatever the usual rate of travel is for, you know, travel allowance you know? So the management made it as easy as possible and as practical as possible to try and get the young people together. (Respondent 5)*

For staff, time to attend meetings, accompany the young people to events, and facilitate groups required them to be consistently available outside normal working hours. How this is facilitated is not uniform: some staff received time in lieu; others volunteered their time.

*You know, as an agency you want people to, you want young people to do well educationally, you know, especially those kids that we're in loco parentis of, you know, and most of them are in school till 4 or 5; our social work department finish at 5.30. It's a difficult realm. (Respondent 17)*

*It was on a Saturday, too, so it meant staff had to forfeit their Saturdays. So you had a six-day week ... We did get allowed for it, but at the same time, you know, it can and did involve either cancelling personal stuff or, you know, being creative with your diary too. [The Principal Social Worker] was one hundred per cent behind the project from the very beginning. She was one hundred per cent interested. She removed where possible any obstacles and, you know, just made sure that she gives the staff their time off in lieu and everything, and she thought of everything really in terms of making it as doable and as practical and as positive as possible. (Respondent 5)*



This issue requires attention given the burden on social work time resources to meet all of their procedural requirements and statutory obligations if ongoing engagement with fora processes over time is to be sustained with consistent facilitators to enable the development of trusting relationships.

*And my worry would be as an organisation, as a service, Tusla, we have so many demands placed on our time that I would worry that without it being driven by an external agent, it could fall flat on its face. That would be a real worry I would have for sustainability. (Respondent 1)*

*Unfortunately, because of the resource issues within Tusla, I think it's work people would really want to do, and like to do, and welcome. Sometimes it's just very difficult to fit it in with everything else that's going on. There's massive pressures on social workers at the moment, particularly in relation to court and paperwork. (Respondent 18)*

*It's the same people, which is good for the kids, and with the Tusla side of it there's only two of us that have been there from the beginning, and there's been a mixture of social workers. So I think that's a bit unnerving; I think that's a gap that needs to be addressed within our group so that the kids know, they know who they're working with and it's not new faces all the time ... Yeah. And it's hard for social workers to do that, because their caseload is huge. (Respondent 19)*

The issue of social work practitioners' consistent engagement with the fora is seen to be critical to the attainment of participation rights. In one area this was difficult to achieve, and this had implications for the facilitation of voice and the perception of actionable challenges, due to a lack of personnel with specific knowledge of social work practices, legislative and policy requirements.

*In some working groups, we don't have social workers, or we don't have principals or area managers involved, and they're the groups I feel are least effective in terms of, they're effective in terms of the young people coming together, and there's all of that really important work like feeling part of that care community, really being acknowledged and valued as young people, having the opportunity to have your say, but there's no influencing audience. (Respondent 6)*

*We went through so many. You'd think we were a really hard group to work with! In the short time we were there, we went through about three social workers ... Maybe if senior management had been involved in actual meetings and stuff, it might have pushed back then the message to social workers how important it was ... My colleagues on the group said, she said it's really striking that other areas have social workers, team leaders, area managers there supporting their young people, and we don't have anyone with us bar our own group, you know. (Respondent 12)*

*Both [...] and I who have done the group since the start, we are not on the children-in-care team, either of us, and we are kind of saying although we enjoy it, we really do enjoy it, what good are we to the young people in the sense that once the fora group ends [...] and I are no longer part of the children in care team. Really it should be some of the social workers in children-in-care should take over this group and keep it going, because they have an attachment to that group of young people. In order to keep it going it needs to be coming from the children in care team. (Respondent 4)*

Attendance at the forum also requires buy-in from the foster parents, and the relevant guardians for the young people. This required engagement and support from the fora facilitators and social work practitioners, which has further implications for the time resources required to enable effective participatory practice.

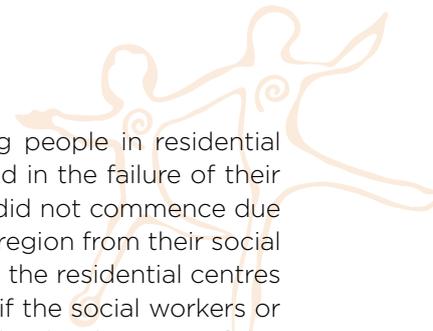
*We did have one child at the very beginning where the foster carers, she went home, and she wanted to know why she couldn't have more time with her parents. And the foster carers freaked a little and said, 'What are they saying to them in that fora group?' And they wanted to stop her from going to it. And basically, what we were talking about that day was just about access and how different it is for everybody. There are some kids that don't get to see their families. There are some kids that only get to see them three times a year. There are some that get to see them once a week, and some of them had overnights. And it just raised questions for her, so she was just asking the question. We had to fight hard to get her back into the group, because we felt that she needed to be in the group so that we could explain to her, you know, probably the reasons why her particular circumstances were a little different. (Respondent 19)*

### **Challenges to Implementing a Universalist Rights Based Approach**

There were challenges to implementing a universalist rights-based approach in this model of collective participation. Offering universal access was not always possible, in the context of child welfare and protective practice, where the best interests of the child are held to be paramount. This is a key provision in rights-based practice, and in this context it should not be taken as failure to ensure that this participatory opportunity offered through a collective model is universally accessible. In this study, accounts were offered as to why some children and young people must be excluded for reasons relating to their own well-being or the welfare of others. This demonstrates the balance that must be maintained between participation and protection, in line with Article 3 of the UNCRC, the principle of best interests as tantamount to the well-being of the child or young person, and Article 19, the right to protection from abuse.

*We spoke to the principal social worker and the team leaders in relation to was there specific kids that we shouldn't invite for a particular reason. For example, if there was children in this list and some of them had been sexually abused, and then there was other children on this list who were perpetrators. Or if there were two children, siblings maybe, who can't have access for whatever reasons. Those kind of things. So we would get them to look at the list of the young people, and if there were specific ones that we shouldn't invite, you know. There wasn't a lot of those, there wasn't a lot of young people that we couldn't invite. (Respondent 4)*

*There was one or two issues, I suppose, where I suppose if behaviours emerged, we had to sort of be practical and sensible and professional about, you know, trying to limit any negative outcomes, like, I suppose, and, well, I can only think of one case where we didn't really look for one young person to come back, because they were a wee bit overbearing and a wee bit, you know, because of their own case, their own circumstances, their own personality, their own behaviours. (Respondent 5)*



However, in some cases the participation rights of a particular cohort of young people in residential care were not met, due to logistical and resource-based considerations, evidenced in the failure of their specific forum to initiate. For young people in residential care, the proposed fora did not commence due to logistical reasons. The young people in residential centres may be in a different region from their social workers, whom they rely on to gather and ensure informed consent. Furthermore, the residential centres have staffing level requirements that could have implications for accompaniment if the social workers or social care practitioners were unavailable. Convening a working group to oversee the development of this initiative was also challenging for this reason. However, for some practitioners it was not clear why some residential young people could not participate in the general group following assessment of suitability. This matter requires clarification in practice if the participatory space is to be accessible in a manner that does not breach Article 2 (UNCRC, 1989), the right to non-discrimination, after the balance between participation and protection is accounted for.

*I suppose there was other people that I thought would really benefit from it that were in residential units at the time that would have been very well able to engage, but they wouldn't have fit the criteria. [...] Young people in residential units have a right to see an EPIC worker as well, and they can get their rights explained, but I just felt that, you know, if they were, if they could be a part of them fora as well, you know? And I think that would be gauged by the social worker if they were able to engage the young person, you know, like they may not be in a space either, they may not be well able to manage it, and that's fine, but I certainly think that it should be gauged, and a bit more exploration and see kind of can they engage as well, because you're still hitting the teenage year mark there, you know? (Respondent 9)*

### **Ensuring Meaningful Influence on Policy and Practice**

As identified in the previous section, ensuring meaningful influence is a challenge. There is evidence of responsiveness at a local level in certain areas, but feedback on the operations of the fora from a national level is slow, with young people not always aware of who the audience for their views were. Some stakeholders feel that it is necessary to further develop the communication and governance structures of the fora in order to improve feedback processes for the young people involved, to ensure participation is experienced as being meaningful and influence can be exerted on policy and service delivery at a national level.

*Realistically there are mechanisms from a local perspective, but I don't think that we have done that nationally, if I'm really honest. I think that's the next stage. It's one that I'm really anxious to start working on. It's not just good enough to hear what kids are saying. How do you know you've been heard? It's when someone responds to you, you get an answer to your question, albeit an answer you don't like. I'm not for one minute saying that we have to, that participation is all about giving young people the responses that they want to hear. It is about creating the circumstances where they ask a question, they get a response. They know why that response is the way it is. I think we have got, in some areas, I think we've got really good lines of communication. (Respondent 6)*

*There needs to be that communication between Tusla and young people, and I sometimes think Tusla don't feel confident about their ability to give good feedback. Like there's a comms department there that's really good at putting information in a way that's actually digestible, you know. They need to be giving young people good-quality information, letting them see that they take on board what they've done, and maybe doing it in a timely way, because that's one thing that Tusla, I find, nationally, it can take a long time to get feedback. (Respondent 12)*

## Sustainability of the Foster Care Action Groups

With regard to the sustainability of the Foster Care Action Groups, planning and continuity are also an issue for further consideration in the further development of structures. There are implications for the allocation of time and human resources to ensure consistent social work engagement with the fora.

*I would be quite passionate that the fora has to be seen as a long-term thing, because there is a process. We are working hard to get the young people in the first fora to sign consent, which they will do, no problem, because they are absolutely hooked on this process. We had seventeen, it started about three years ago; I think there was about thirteen or fourteen who still dip in and out of it, and some of these are young adults at this stage. And two or three of them are really anxious to continue to be involved. (Respondent 1)*

For some practitioners, funding and the allocation of staff time resources were seen as key to the continuity of the fora, given the importance of consistent facilitators to enhance the development of trusted relationships and the operation of the fora as a youth-led process over time.

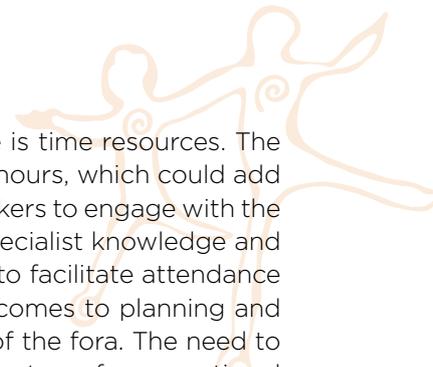
*Funding and I suppose bodies in terms of people being available, wanting ready to go again, you know what I mean? As I say, there was a good core group of people, but things were delayed because I suppose, you know, people, tutors not being available and stuff like that, so I think if people, if more people were available and were there, would be good, but then I'm going back to kind of being consistent as well about being, you know, some of the same people being present at every one, you know what I mean? Just so that you're not having a kind of stranger present every single time. (Respondent 9)*

*It's very hard to find individual pots of money at times to fund individual pieces of work like fora, like you know, the fora funding came from another, they're not localised funding, they're funding from outside, from national. I just feel sometimes that we need to be thinking about how we build this into our practice, so it becomes part of that fora are a normal, you know, that we run a number a year, that they're a normal, they're integrated into what Tusla do going forward. (Respondent 17)*

## 5.3 Summary of Benefits and Challenges to Implementation

There were important benefits for the young people who participated in the Tusla and EPIC Foster Care Action Groups. The primary benefit was the opportunity to be social in a space free of stigma where it was not necessary to explain any differences in your lived experience to your peers. This also facilitated the identification of common challenges in this community of shared experience. Participation in the fora supported the development of personal capacities and skills, along with the development of a positive identity through positive engagement with a community-shared experience in a civic-minded approach. Another important benefit was the opportunity to access help, guidance, and support on aspects of the care experience that were challenging in a safe space outside of individual participatory opportunities that are dominated by adults.

For the organisation, interagency collaboration contributed to new, participative ways of working, helped develop trusting relationships, and offered opportunities to promote positive interactions with social work practitioners and young people in care. The space outside of formal care processes was seen as beneficial to promoting reflective practice due to the dissolution of procedural requirements in this space. Collaborative practice was seen to enhance the potential for transformative practice.



The primary challenge to participation from both stakeholders and young people is time resources. The nature of the participation opportunity means it must take place outside working hours, which could add strain to the workload of practitioners. This could affect the availability of social workers to engage with the fora, with evidence that this could limit transformative practice due to a lack of specialist knowledge and skills. The busy timetables of young participants and their dependence on others to facilitate attendance were also logistically challenging. Resourcing continues to be a concern when it comes to planning and continuity, given the staff time, transport, activities, and facilitation requirements of the fora. The need to enable meaningful influence also requires attention to be paid to communication systems from a national level to local level and access to governance structures. This remains an area in need of improvement if participation is to be experienced as meaningful by the young participants. Consideration must be given to engaging children and young people in residential care, as this group of young people may have different experiences of care processes than the young people in foster care. If this cohort is not facilitated to identify positive challenges that are actionable, opportunities to improve service development and policy may be lost. Furthermore, it may be that the supportive group processes overseen by skilled and knowledgeable facilitators may be useful in improving their experiences of care processes. a-vis risks and lack of resources for children with communication and sensory difficulties were identified as the main challenges in the HIQA reports at follow up.

# 6

## Concluding Discussion and Recommendations

This section discusses the findings in order to inform reflection on future practice in this area. Attention is given to various enabling and constraining factors in terms of the context in which the model of participatory practice is embedded, the evaluation of practice using the Lundy model, a consideration of the benefits accrued, and challenges faced in order to make recommendations.

### 6.1 The Context

The context in which this participatory opportunity is embedded is supportive of children and young people's participation, particularly in the area of collective participation and the opportunity to have their views considered in relation to the development of policy and service delivery (Horwath et al, 2011). This is due to three factors.

The first enabling factor relates to the legislation that underpins the implementation of this initiative. The influence of the UNCRC (1989) is evident in the Child and Family Agency Act (2013), relating to the requirement for children and young people to have their views considered in relation to policy and service delivery.

The second enabling factor relates to the organisation's interpretation of participatory rights using the Lundy model: a potentially robust frame for participatory practice if efforts continue to further develop systemic relationships between the fora and national decision-makers that enable universally beneficial influence and meaningful participation. The Lundy model is also a useful evaluation tool that allows for ongoing reflection on the achievement of participatory rights for children and young people in care.

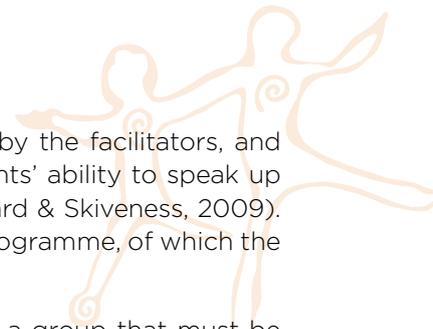
The third enabling contextual factor relates to Tusla's commitment to embedding participatory practice throughout the organisation which enhances the capacity of practitioners to implement a rights-based approach in practice. This is evident in the ongoing development of children's participation as part of the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) programme, of which the Tusla and EPIC Fora are part.

### 6.2 The Achievement of Participatory Rights

In consideration of the effectiveness of this model of collective participation, it is useful to reflect, using the Lundy model concepts, on how relational and situational factors may have affected practice.

#### **Young People's Recruitment and Attendance**

Through the operation of the fora, Tusla and EPIC have provided a safe space for children and young people in care to potentially influence policy and practice. The centrality of relational factors in the development of a safe space that facilitated the voice of the young person in care is evident in the accounts of both young participants and adult stakeholders. The time spent developing relationships through activities, the



support for youth-led agenda setting, the open, non-judgemental stance taken by the facilitators, and the development of supportive peer relationships enhanced the young participants' ability to speak up on issues that affect them (Cossar et al., 2016; Nybell, 2013; Vis et al., 2010; Archard & Skiveness, 2009). participation as part of the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) programme, of which the Tusla and EPIC Fora are part.

However, it is not just the interactional relational factors but the constitution of a group that must be considered in rights-based practice. A safe space, according to Lundy (2007), should be universally accessible, free from discrimination, and voluntary, if the rights of children and young people are to be achieved. Participation in the fora was voluntary and facilitated by invitation. There was no discrimination evident in relation to capacity to participate, with three out of five fora sampled having at least one member with special needs. The age bracket for acceptance of young participants was the primary recruitment standard, and all children and young people in the bracket age group were invited to attend. It has been recommended that in the deliberative processes in which children and young people participate, there should be no significant differences between the participants and their ability to express a point of view (Archard & Skiveness, 2009). Therefore, it can be argued that the limitation of access to age groups was an effective way to promote a community of shared interest, enabling effective participation while still realising Lundy's vision of a safe space.

However, the issue of 'representativeness' should be considered, particularly when it comes to participatory opportunities with the potential to instigate transformative outputs that may affect all children and young people in care. The 'hard to reach' groups, for example profoundly disabled children, those who are unwilling to engage, non-English-speakers, and youth in residential care, may not have had their interests represented by the conduct of these fora (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012; McLeod, 2007). This issue is worth considering in further development of this initiative, given the exclusion of young people in residential care from participation in this initiative.

The situational factors which influenced the collective model of participation included commitment to the idea of participation as a youth-led activity in informal settings over time using appropriate methods. It is clear that the voice of the young participants was enabled through primarily non-directive information and support, facilitated by creative methodologies and group processes by skilled and knowledgeable facilitators. The time devoted to discussion and information, and in some cases creative reflection on challenges, further ensured the expression of views. These methods, and the supportive relationships that were developed, have enhanced the young participants' capacity to participate in the fora (Cashmore, 2007; Wright et al., 2006).

The engagement of appropriate adult supporters was an important part of the relational factors considered in this evaluation. The importance of social work involvement with the fora was underlined by a perceived unactionable concern that arose during group work with one fora area. In this forum, some felt that engagement with social work practitioners – with their specialist knowledge and connection to practice – would have enhanced the operation of the forum. Therefore, organisational capacity, and the human and time resources required to ensure that appropriate skills and knowledge are available to the fora, may need consideration.

Interagency collaboration has helped the implementation of this model of collective participation (Waldock, 2016: 311). Diverse skills and knowledge allowed for the identification of actionable challenges and youth-friendly ways of working, while meeting young participants' need for independent support in a context of scarce social work resources. The presence of advocates in the fora structure was appreciated by many of the young participants and stakeholders (Kennan et al, 2016: 16; Vis & Thomas, 2009; Wright et al., 2006).

## **Audience and Influence**

There is evidence of the fora providing opportunities to convey their views to key decision-makers in the fora structure, and to an audience of social work practitioners whom the young people referred to as their desired audience. Opportunity to meet a varied audience outside of the fora operations who recognised the efforts of the young people and the reality of their experiences was an important part of the fora journey, leading to feelings of enhanced capabilities and the validation of their emotions. However, due to regional differences in terms of direct access to decision-makers and formal recognition processes from a governance level, some young participants did not to experience participation as meaningful in terms of organisational feedback and recognition. This is despite evidence of engagement and interest in fora operations from local governance levels. This demonstrates that there is a need to reflect on opportunities to enhance the young people's perception of meaningful participation through formalised recognition processes and increased access to direct audiences, particularly for those in more decentralised rural areas.

Influence on policy and practice arising from the work of the fora is evident at a local level in relation to changes in social work processes and procedures, and indirectly in reflective practice on the part of social work practitioners. There is not yet evidence of local fora having an impact at national level. Potentially influential documents that may be of great utility to the general population of children and young people in care are awaiting review and implementation. However, the process for this is not evident to all young participants.

These findings indicate that systemic relationships between the participation initiatives and national decision-makers require further development. This has implications for the young participants' experience of participation as meaningful rather than tokenistic and for the achievement of transformative participative practice that benefits children and young people in care at a national level (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). This is an important consideration if collective participation is defined as 'the goal of improving services for everyone in the same situation' (Seim and Slettebø, 2011).

## **6.3 Benefits and Challenges to Implementation**

### **Benefits for the Young Participants**

It is important to note that for some young participants, transformative output was not necessarily the most vital component of fora participation. The social support available as a result of participation in the fora was considered a vital resource. This consists of peer support generated from this community of shared experience and the supportive relationships developed with adult facilitators that enabled the young participants to navigate and process challenging experiences (Mitchell et al., 2009). It is argued here that participation for foster children is as much about emotional and social recognition as it is about legal recognition (Warming et al., 2006).

Participation in the fora supported the development of personal capacities and skills along with the development of a positive identity through a process of community engagement. Another important benefit was the opportunity to access help, guidance, and support in relation to challenging aspects of the care experience in a safe space outside of individual participatory opportunities that were dominated by adults. This is an important consideration, given the evidence in research of poor social, emotional, and welfare outcomes for care leavers (Moran et al., 2017; Daly, 2012; Mullan et al., 2007; Munro, 2001; Stein et al., 2000).



## Benefits for the Organisation

For the organisation, interagency collaboration contributed to new participatory ways of working, helped develop trusting relationships, and offered opportunities to promote positive interactions with social work practitioners and young people in care. The space outside of formal care processes was seen as beneficial to promoting reflective practice due to the dissolution of procedural requirements in this space. Collaborative practice was seen to enhance the potential for transformative practice.

## 6.4 Challenges for Implementation

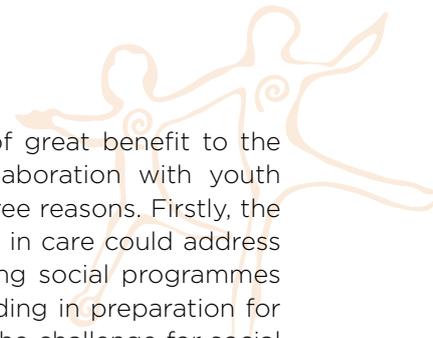
The primary challenge to participation from both stakeholders and young people is time resources. The nature of the participatory opportunity means it must take place outside normal working hours, which could add strain to the workload of practitioners. This could affect the availability of social workers to engage with the fora, with evidence that this could limit transformative practice due to a lack of specialist knowledge and skills. The busy timetables of young participants, and their dependence on others to facilitate attendance, were also challenging. Resourcing continues to be a concern when it comes to planning and continuity, given the staff time, transport, activities, and facilitation requirements of the fora.

The need to enable meaningful influence also requires attention to be paid to communication systems from a national level to local level. Access to governance structures remains an area in need of improvement if participation is to be experienced as meaningful by the young participants. Consideration must also be given to engaging children and young people in residential care if non-discriminatory participation practice is to be achieved.

## 6.5 Recommendations for Future Practice

- The operation of the Foster Care Action Groups as a youth-led process over time, supported by skilled and knowledgeable facilitators, was an effective way of providing a safe space for children and young people in care to express their views in relation to service provision and policy developments. It is recommended that this model be continued.
- Given the success in interagency collaboration that is evident in this study, it is recommended that the use of independent advocates be continued in future fora operations. The advocates bring a range of child- and youth-friendly group work skills and activities to the table that are also of benefit to this model of collective participation.
- A toolkit of practical activities and creative projects that can be used to frame discussion and reflection on the experience of the care process would be useful in ensuring maximum participation of young participants of different capacities, through the facilitation of understanding, while meeting their needs for information and guidance. The toolkit should be viewed as a menu of potential options for supportive practice rather than a prescriptive template for practice, as youth-led agenda-setting is an important part of participatory practice that enables the authentic voice of the child or youth.
- Adequate consideration needs to be given to the human resources required for participative practice, given the importance of social work practitioners as skilled knowledge holders. In addition to the consistent staff participation in fora cycles required for relational work, consideration needs to be given to transport for young participants, particularly in rural, geographically diverse catchment areas, and to the provision of activities that promote positive trusting relationships and develop the capacity of young participants to express their views.

- It is recommended that attention be paid to the participation of children and young people in residential centres. This could be implemented through the provision of fora particular to their cohort, or, following assessment, through participation in general fora particular to their local area. It is acknowledged that this would be difficult to achieve given the logistical requirements particular to this group. However, this cohort is subject to policies, regulations, and a particular experience of childhood defined by their status as children and young people in care and its effect on lived experience. It may be that they would benefit from access to social support, information and guidance, and the development of personal capacities in a manner similar to the foster care group.
- The recruitment strategy requires review in line with the findings of this report. Some young participants said they felt that the initial invitation to the fora, which described it as an opportunity to feed back into service delivery and have their say on the experiences of being in care, was too serious and not particularly appealing to their age cohort. In recruitment materials, it is recommended that attention be paid to the social aspect of fora operations, and that a menu of potential activities, ranging from days away at activity centres, movie nights, and workshops be presented, tailored to each area.
- Efforts should be made to have events in each local area where both primary audiences (stakeholders involved in fora operations and governance) and secondary audiences (practitioners and professionals who work with children in care but are not directly involved in forums) could have the opportunity to meet the young participants at local social and celebratory events, even if the group focus is on social support. This may help promote a sense of being heard and valued, which may lead to further engagement with the aim of the fora: the expression of views to Tusla management with a view to influencing policy and practice. Regular dissemination and feedback processes would enable access to the secondary audience of social workers unattached to fora operations who are deemed an appropriate audience for the outputs of the fora by the young participants.
- National participation conferences are beneficial in providing an opportunity for the recognition of the unique situation of children and young people in care, while providing an opportunity to network and share ideas. This platform provides direct access to primary audiences of decision-makers at a national level. Some form of positive feedback and recognition processes should be included in this programme to enhance young participants' feelings of being heard and sense of personal efficacy.
- Feedback mechanisms from both national level to regional level and directly to the young participants themselves should be further developed to ensure that the young people have a sense of accomplishment when they engage with positive challenges identified throughout the care process. If possible, young participants could elect their own representatives from within their group to meet with national decision-makers to present their proposals and be recognised for the work they have done. Consideration should be given to the timely review of outputs of the fora so that all the young people involved experience recognition and a sense of self-efficacy.



- The social support and access to information and guidance were of great benefit to the young participants. For this reason, it is recommended that collaboration with youth groups or organisations be considered. This would be positive for three reasons. Firstly, the ongoing maintenance of a safe space for children and young people in care could address recruitment issues, by maintaining a programme of targeted ongoing social programmes and support. Secondly, this would maintain a group while team-building in preparation for convening a more task-orientated forum. Thirdly, this could address the challenge for social work resources in engaging with the fora, requiring ongoing commitment to facilitation and support when a forum is convened. The fourth consideration here is that this would meet the young participants' expressed desire for ongoing engagement with their group activities and potentially expand the opportunity to those young people who may have opted out of the fora for various reasons.
- In order to monitor and review further implementation of the collective model of participation, it is recommended that consideration be given to the use of a logic model framework as used by youth work organisations to facilitate future evaluations of the fora. This is potentially very useful for further development of the model, given its reliance on both intangible and difficult-to-measure relational factors and tangible situational factors that may influence the operation of the fora.

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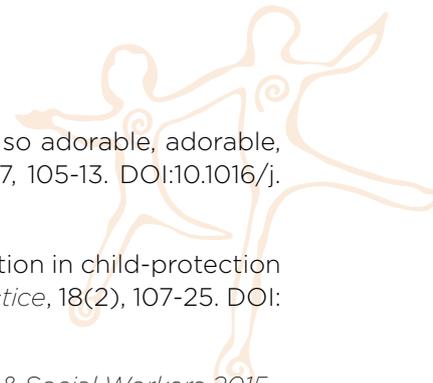
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# Appendix 1

## Practitioner Information Sheet

Dear(Name),

This document gives you all the information you need to know about the conduct of this study.

### **Purpose of this study**

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre has been commissioned by Tusla to conduct a focused programme of research and evaluation on the implementation and outcomes of Tusla's PPFS Development and Mainstreaming programme. This study fits into this overall investigation into practice evaluation.

### **What will this study focus on?**

As part of this study our team is involved in exploring children and youth participation in decision-making structures. The overall aim of this study is to explore the extent to which the fora established by EPIC, in partnership with Tusla, facilitate the collective participation of children and young people in care and influence Tusla policy and practice. ber.

### **Who are the researchers?**

The researchers are Rebecca Jackson MA – you can contact her at [r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie](mailto:r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie) or 086 199986, and Dr Bernadine Brady – you can contact her at [bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie](mailto:bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie) or 091 495759.

### **What do we plan to do?**

As part of this study, we would like to focus in detail on the workings of eight of the fifteen fora established to date. We will describe the model, explore the processes of the fora and assess the level of influence achieved through each of the eight fora. To do this, we wish to explore the perspectives of stakeholders, including staff, practitioners, as well as child and youth participants affiliated with the programme.

### **What does it involve for you?**

We are inviting you to take part in a one-to-one interview to explore your perception of the local forum, its processes and its outcomes. The interview can either be conducted face to face or via telephone at a time you find convenient. It is envisaged that this interview could take up to one hour.

### **What will happen with the information gathered?**

The information gathered will be submitted as an evaluation report with recommendations for future work in this area. The data gathered will also be used for academic publications and presentations and a PhD dissertation. All information that is collected about you and the fora during the conduct of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared with anyone else. The information collected in this research study will be stored in a way that protects your identity and the identity of the young people involved. The recordings will be transcribed for analysis. We will store the original recordings securely for five years in accordance with NUI Galway's Data Retention Policy, after which they will be destroyed. Results from the study will be reported as group data and will not identify you in any way.

As the researchers will be adhering to Child First Guidelines (2011) and NUIG Child Protection Policy, they will report any disclosures of abuse/risk of abuse to Tusla. This is the only time child and youth anonymity and confidentiality will be waived.

**What if you are unhappy with the conduct of the interview or have received complaints about the research with the EPIC fora?**

If, after taking part, you have any complaints regarding the conduct of this research, or you have questions regarding the conduct of the research with the child and youth forum, you can contact Rebecca Jackson at [r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie](mailto:r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie) or Bernadine Brady at [bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie](mailto:bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie) or 091 495759.

However, if you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee, c/o Office of the Vice President for Research, NUI Galway, [ethics@nuigalway.ie](mailto:ethics@nuigalway.ie).

**What happens next?**

We will be in contact with you shortly to make arrangements for your interview and to advise you of our forum study date. If you require further information in relation to this study, please feel free to contact Rebecca Jackson or Bernadine Brady.

Thank you for time, and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Rebecca Jackson  
Child and Family Research Centre  
NUI Galway.  
[r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie](mailto:r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie)

Bernadine Brady  
Child and Family Research Centre  
NUI Galway.  
[bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie](mailto:bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie)



# Appendix 2

## Practitioner Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

Please initial box:

I <b>confirm that I have read the information sheet</b>	
I am satisfied that <b>I understand the information</b> provided and have had enough <b>time to consider</b> the information	
I have had <b>the opportunity to ask questions</b>	
I understand that the <b>information gathered will be used for reports, academic publications and a PhD dissertation</b>	
I <b>agree to take part</b> in the above study	

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your help!**

## Appendix 3

### Letter of Invitation for Caregiver(s)

Dear Caregiver(s),

We are writing to you to seek permission for your child/young person to take part in a study we will be conducting as part of the EPIC Forum on the (date tbc). Tusla has asked the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway to study how the Tusla & EPIC fora help children and young people contribute to Tusla policy and practice. This is an important study as it will help us understand if children and young people can express their views about care in a safe and inclusive way and to make recommendations on future practice in this area.

We would like to include your child in a focus group we will be conducting as part of the forum meeting on \_\_\_\_ (date). This will be a group process, lasting approximately one hour, where your child will be encouraged to input as much or as little as they wish into the group activities. We also intend to observe one meeting at the same date. If you or your child does not wish to take part, other creative and fun activities will be provided.

This is a confidential study, and you or your child won't be identifiable. All information is anonymous and none of the researchers will have access to individual case files. Also, none of the services that you or your child might be accessing will be affected should you choose to take part or not. Participation in this study is voluntary. You and your child can decide whether to agree to take part.

More details about this study are given in the Participant Information Sheet, and we ask that you read this document. We also ask that you talk to your child about the study. We need the consent of Caregiver(s) and the assent of child/young person for them to take part. If you or your child/young person does not want to take part, then we won't include them in our focus groups, and other activities will be arranged for your child while the research is ongoing on the day of the forum. Also, it is important to know that if your child changes their mind and wishes to withdraw from the focus group, they are free to tell the researcher they would like to leave. They can also choose not to answer any question at any time.

Either way, please return the consent forms in the stamped addressed envelopes provided to indicate your wishes. Thank you in advance for considering this invitation, and we look forward to hearing from you in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Rebecca Jackson  
Child and Family Research Centre  
NUI Galway.  
r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie

Bernadine Brady  
Child and Family Research Centre  
NUI Galway.  
bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie

# Appendix 4

## Participant Information Sheet for Caregiver(s)

Dear Caregiver(s),

This sheet is designed to give you more information about the study we will be conducting on children and young people in care's collective participation in the Tusla & EPIC fora. As you know, the fora have been set up to provide a space for children and young people to talk about things that affect them whilst in care and to give them an opportunity to influence service delivery.

### **So what's this all about?**

Tusla has commissioned the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway to explore whether the Tusla & EPIC fora help children and young people to express their views about being in care and whether their views are listened to and acted on by Tusla. This is an important study as it will help us to make recommendations on future practice in this area.

### **What do I do?**

Take the time to read this information sheet and read the child and young person's information sheet with your foster child carefully. It is important to think about what this study will involve and your child's wishes regarding participation. If you are happy for your child / young person to take part, please fill in the attached consent form and return it via the stamped addressed envelope provided.

### **Who are the researchers?**

The researchers are Rebecca Jackson MA – you can contact her at [r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie](mailto:r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie) or Dr Bernadine Brady – you can contact her at [bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie](mailto:bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie) or 091 495759.

### **How will the research be conducted?**

The children will take part in a focus group (a group interview with activities) to talk about their experience on the Tusla & EPIC Forum. The questions we will be asking will include: how do they think it works as a space to be heard, who do they think listens to them, and what do they do with the information. We will also attend one of the meetings to see how it works.

### **Does my foster child have to take part?**

No, they don't have to take part. Either you or your foster-child can choose not to take part. However, we need your consent as well as your child's consent to take part in the study. Taking part or not taking part will not make any difference to the services provided for your child. Your child can choose to not participate at any time, either for one or more questions or to leave the session if they wish. If your child does not take part they will be provided with other activities on the date.

### **Are there any risks to taking part?**

We know that being in care is sometimes a difficult experience for a child or young person and that there is a small risk they might feel emotional or experience uncomfortable feelings talking to the researcher about this. If this happens, you can tell them they should tell the researcher, who will ask them if they want to continue the interview or not. If they need support, EPIC staff will be on hand to provide assistance if needs be. There won't be any negative consequences for your child if they want to stop taking part at any time.

**How will the information be collected and stored?**

All interviews with children and young people are recorded on an electronic recorder. This will be stored very safely so only the research team will hear the interview. All data gathered will be anonymised when making the report and there will be no personal information about your child passed on.

**Will someone be able to identify my foster child from what they say in an interview?**

No. Details about your foster child won't be given to anyone else either and it won't be possible for anyone to recognise your foster child.

**What happens if a concern about risk to the child is talked about during the interview?**

If you or your child tells us about something that has put your child, or another child, at risk of harm or abuse, we will be obliged to pass this information on to TUSLA as part of our responsibility for child protection under Children First (2011) Guidelines.

**What if I am not happy with the research?**

We hope that this research process will be enjoyable for your child and they will not be upset or concerned. But if you are not happy with the research, you can discuss this Rebecca Jackson MA - you can contact her at [r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie](mailto:r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie) and Dr. Bernadine Brady - you can contact her at [bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie](mailto:bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie) or 091 495759.

**What if I want to talk to someone independent from the research team?**

If you have any questions or concerns about your foster child's rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee, c/o Office of Vice President for Research, NUI Galway. They are also contactable by e-mail at [ethics@nuigalway.ie](mailto:ethics@nuigalway.ie)

**Thank you for considering this invitation, we look forward to hearing from you in the future.**



# Appendix 5

## Consent Form for Caregivers

### CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR CAREGIVERS

Please read the Participant Information Sheet before you agree/do not Agree to take part in the research.

**Please tick to indicate whether you agree to take part, or you do not agree:**

I have read the information sheets provided to me and I have discussed participation in the research with my foster child	
I understand that my foster child's <b>participation is voluntary</b> and that <b>they can choose to withdraw</b> at any time	
<b>I agree</b> to my foster child's participation in the research project on children and young people's participation in Tusla & EPIC fora	
<b>or</b>	
<b>I do not agree</b> to my foster child's participation in the research project on children and young people's participation in Tusla & EPIC fora	

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your help.**

# Appendix 6

## Information Sheet for Young People

Dear EPIC Forum Participant,

This information sheet gives you information about the research study on children in care who participate on Tusla & EPIC fora. You are invited to take part in the research, and it is very important that you know what the project is about and what you are asked to do. Please take the time to read this document and ask your caregiver(s) for help if you have any questions.

### **So what's this all about?**

You are being asked if you would like to take part in research on children and young people's experience of taking part on the Tusla & EPIC fora. We would like to know what you think about this so we can tell the Tusla what you have told us and suggest ways to work on this type of project in the future.

### **Why is it important?**

This research is important as it allows the Tusla, EPIC and us, the researchers, to understand how you feel about taking part in this project, what is good, what is bad and what could be made better. Most importantly, we want to know if you think it helps if people listen to what you have to say about being in care.

### **Why should I take part?**

Hearing children's and young people's opinion is very important for improving services for children in care. It is important that these services take account of your opinions to develop better services for children and young people.

### **What do I do?**

If you would like to take part, talk to your caregiver(s), who also received information on the study. If you would like to be involved in the research and your caregiver(s) are happy for you to take part, you can read through the consent form, and once you are happy with it, you can sign the form.

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to talk about taking part on the EPIC forum as part of a group, just like the forum! We will also ask you about who listens to you in the forum, and does anybody else hear what you have to say, do you think it makes a difference. We would also visit one of the meetings to see how it works.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No, you don't have to take part! And even if you decide you'd like to take part in the research and then change your mind, that's okay! Also, taking part or not taking part will not make any difference to the services provided for you. If you choose not to take part, you can still come along, and other games and creative activities will be provided for you on the day.



### **What happens if I don't want to answer a question?**

You don't have to answer! If you don't want to answer a question, you can choose not to answer and move on to the next question. And you can leave or choose not to take part at any time you wish.

### **Could anything bad happen if I take part?**

During the group discussion, there is a small chance you might have uncomfortable feelings or emotions. If this happens, you should tell the researcher, who will ask you if you wish to continue with the interview, or decide not to take part anymore. EPIC staff will be outside the door and you can leave at any time. ***If you tell us something about you or another child that puts you at risk of harm, then we are required to pass this information on as part of our responsibility to keep children safe.***

### **How will the information be collected?**

We will take notes and the discussions will be recorded on an electronic recording device. We will keep the information safe, and only the researchers will see or hear it. The researchers will look at notes from the group discussions to see what messages children and young people are giving at the meeting, and we will put it into a report.

### **Will anyone know they were my answers?**

No. The information is confidential and anonymous. Nobody will be able to identify you. Any information that we will collect will be destroyed after five years and we will keep it locked safe away until then.

### **Who are the researchers?**

The researchers are Rebecca Jackson MA – You can contact her at [rjackson1@nuigalway.ie](mailto:rjackson1@nuigalway.ie) or Dr Bernadine Brady – you can contact her at [bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie](mailto:bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie) or 091 495759.

### **Anything else I need to know?**

We will do our best to ensure that the research process is enjoyable and not upsetting for you. If you are not happy, you can talk to Rebecca or Bernadine. You can also ask your caregiver(s) to do this for you. If you would like to take part, and your caregiver(s) are also happy for you to take part, you can read through the consent form, and once you are happy with it, you can sign the form.

**Thank you for considering this invitation, we look forward to hearing from you in the future.**

# Appendix 7

## Young People's Consent Form

### Research on Children and Young People in Care's Collective Participation in the Tusla/EPIC Fora

If you want to take part in the project on children in care involved in the EPIC fora, you must tick the boxes. Please read the Participant Information Sheet or ask your caregiver to do this for you.

I have <b>read the information sheet</b> and <b>talked about it with my Caregivers</b>	
I know that <b>I do not have to take part if I do not want to and I can leave the study at any time</b>	
I know that <b>I don't have to answer a question if I don't want to</b>	

**Please tick the box below if you agree to take part:**

<b>I agree</b> to take part in this research and for information to go into reports and academic papers	
---	--

**Please tick the box below if you do not agree to take part:**

<b>I do not agree</b> to take part	
------------------------------------	--

My name is: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix 8

## Youth Advisory Group Information Sheet

Dear Participant and Caregiver,

You are being invited to take part on a Youth Advisory Panel to help advise a team of researchers from the UNESCO Child and Family researchers from NUI Galway. Before you agree or disagree to take part in this group, you should read very carefully the following information. Please ensure that you discuss this opportunity fully with your caregiver/foster child.

### **Purpose/Role of the Group**

A youth advisory panel is a group of young people who provide advice and support to organisations. The broad purpose of this youth advisory project is to provide insight and feedback into the research design process and to provide information that you think will be helpful to us as we go about our research due to your unique experience and insight.

### **What is the research project?**

We would like to do research with children and young people to explore their experience of participation in the EPIC fora. We would like to find out what's good, bad or could be improved about the EPIC forum. We want to find out do the children and young people feel listened to and do they think it has made a difference. The research itself will consist of focus groups, a type of group interview with individual fora in different areas and observation of the fora in action.

### **Working Methods.**

This group would meet with the researchers three to four times over the conduct of the research, with all costs incurred in meeting attendance met by the Child and Family research centre. The meetings would consist of roundtable discussion of issues the youth advisory panel feel are important with regard to the EPIC fora and the children's and young people's participation in the fora. Your opinion would also be sought in relation to question and activity choice for the focus groups, to make sure that everyone would be able to understand what was being asked and that we did not miss any important questions that we should be asking.

### **Who will organise and chair the meeting?**

The meeting will be organised by EPIC staff and NUI Galway, but they would be timed so as not to disrupt school or other activities. NUI Galway researchers will have an agenda at the first roundtable discussion in that your views on the research are very important to us.

### **Who are the researchers?**

The researchers are Rebecca Jackson MA, and you can contact her at [r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie](mailto:r.jackson1@nuigalway.ie) and Dr Bernadine Brady, and you can contact her at [bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie](mailto:bernadine.brady@nuigalway.ie) or 091-495795. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

### **How will information and resources be treated?**

All information gathered in the process of the advisory meetings will be treated as confidential in the final documentation; however, a small group EPIC coordinators will be aware of group membership but will not be able to identify individual inputs.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, you do not have to take part if you do not want to. Your participation is voluntary, and if you choose to not take part at any time, that is okay. The services you receive will not be affected whether you take part or not.

**Definition of terms relating to our research that we will be thinking about?**

**Collective:** relating to a group of people.

**Participation:** Taking part.

**Fora:** An Assembly Meeting Place.

**Space:** Do children and young people have a place where their voice can be heard.

**Voice:** Are all children and young people encouraged and supported to speak about their experiences.

**Audience:** Does anybody listen to the children and young people, and who listens to them.

**Influence:** Do the people that hear the voices of the children and young people take action based on what they have heard.

**Any questions?**

If you have any questions regarding this process, please feel free to contact (name) at (number) or (email).

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you very much for your time and we look forward to hearing from you in the future.**



# Appendix 9

## Consent Form for the Youth Advisory Panel

If you wish to take part in the youth advisory panel, you must fill in this consent form and return it to us via the stamped self-addressed envelope.

I have <b>read the information sheet</b> and <b>I know what the role of the Youth Advisory Panel is</b>	
I know that my <b>participation is voluntary</b>	
I know that I can <b>choose not to take part at any time</b>	

**If you agree to take part on the youth advisory panel, please tick the box below:**

<b>I agree</b> to take part in the Youth Advisory Panel	
---	--

**OR**

**If you do not agree to take part on the Youth Advisory Panel, please tick the box below:**

<b>I do not agree</b> to take part in this Youth Advisory Panel	
---	--

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix 10

## Consent Form for Caregiver(s) Youth Advisory Panel

If you wish to take part in the youth advisory panel, you must fill in this consent form and return it to us via the stamped self-addressed envelope.

I have <b>read the information sheet</b> and <b>I know what the role of the Youth Advisory Panel is</b>	
I know that <b>my foster child's participation is voluntary</b>	
I know that they can <b>choose not to take part at any time</b>	

**If you agree to allow your foster child to take part on the Youth Advisory Panel, please tick the box below:**

<b>I agree</b> to allow my foster child to take part in the Youth Advisory Panel	
--	--

**OR**

**If you do not agree to take part on the Youth Advisory Panel, please tick the box below:**

<b>I do not agree</b> to allow my foster child to take part in this Youth Advisory Panel	
--	--

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



# Appendix 11

## Qualitative Interview Guides for Practitioners

Begin with an opening question/statement such as the following: I'm doing a project on children in care's participation on EPIC fora, and I'd really like to gain some insight into how the fora are operating and also the unique experience you as a practitioner have of this model of collective participation.

There are three thematic areas to explore, and the following gives examples of types of question we might ask.

### **Describe the model:**

1. How do they understand the fora model of collective participation for children and young people in care; what is it for?
2. What are its inputs (time, staff resources) and outputs (reports, changes in practice and policy)?

### **Describe the Processes:**

3. How are the fora run in your area?
4. Who takes the responsibility to organise the meetings?
5. Do the young people have any responsibilities on the forum?
6. How is the agenda set?
7. Who takes the notes and writes reports?
8. How do Tusla and EPIC cooperate?

### **How Is This Model Of Participation Viewed By Staff/Practitioners:**

9. In your opinion, has this model been useful as a way to gather the views and experiences of children and young people in care?
10. Is there anything new that you have learned about children and young people in care as a result of this project?
11. What has been the feedback you received from children and young people in care of their experience taking part, if any?
12. Have the reports generated been useful to you?
13. Is there anything you would change about the operation of the fora??
14. Do you know of other ways to gather the experience of children and young people in care, and how do they compare to the fora?

**Other Information?** Is there anything else you think is important for us to know that we might not have thought of here?

# Appendix 12

## Foundation of Focus Group Plan

**Warm-up and icebreakers:** Introduce everyone in the room to the researchers and vice versa. Take a temperature reading. This activity to gauge how people are feeling involves movement along a temperature scale on the ground, from hot to cold using a variety of questions, to draw the researcher's attention to anyone who may be feeling nervous or unsure. **This activity can be repeated at the end of the session to allow any remaining issues to be addressed and measure how the focus group was received.**

This research aims to be participatory in nature and involve a youth advisory panel in the construction of the research instruments, advising us as to the types of questions that should be asked and the types of exercises they think the children and young people will engage with. A selection of exercises designed to elicit response will be developed using **Lundy's Voice Model Checklist for Participation (DCYA, 2015).**

**Space: Provide a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views.**

1. Have Children's Views been sought?
2. Was there a safe space in which children can freely express themselves?
3. Have steps been taken to ensure all children can freely express themselves?

**Voice: Provide appropriate information and facilitate the expression of children's views.**

4. Have children been given the information they need to form a view?
5. Do children know that they don't have to take part?
6. Have children been given a broad range of options as to how they might choose to express themselves?

**Audience: Ensure that children's views are communicated to someone with responsibility to listen.**

7. Is there a process for communicating children's views?
8. Do children know who their views are being communicated to?
9. Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?

**Influence: Ensure that children's views are taken seriously and acted upon where appropriate.**

10. Were the children's views considered by those with the power to effect change?
11. Are there procedures in place that ensure that the children's views have been taken seriously?
12. Have the children and young people been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?







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**TUSLA**

An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

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