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Forum for Young People in Care



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of the following people for their help and assistance in establishing the Forum for Young People in Care. Pat Dunne, Assistant National Director, HSE, Dublin North East for the support and commitment he has shown to this process. To all the Steering Committee members for their excellent advice and guidance which was invaluable throughout the planning and the development of the Forum. The support of the young people's Social Workers and their Foster Carers is also greatly appreciated. A special thanks to Karen Kavanagh, Community Social Care Worker who kindly acted as the third facilitator. Thanks to Emily Logan and all her staff at the OCO who provided us with the use of their premises during the life of the Forum. To Norman Madden for his patience and creative input and design of this report.

And finally we would especially like to thank the 8 young people who gave of their time so willingly to participate in the Forum. For their honesty in sharing with us their experience of foster care. Without them this Forum would not have been possible. They should all be extremely proud of themselves.

Congratulations and WELL DONE!!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2006 The Irish Association of Young People in Care (IAYPIC) employed two Children's Rights & Participation Officers with funding provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) Dublin North. The role of the Children's Rights & Participation Officers is to advocate for and promote the rights and needs of young people in care. Through consultation with the HSE North Dublin it was agreed that one of the initial aims of this project would be to gather the views of young people in foster care as service users through the establishment of a Forum for Young People in Care. As part of their remit the Children's Rights & Participation Officers were asked by the HSE to establish and oversee such a Forum.

The target group proposed for inclusion in the Forum were young people in both relative and non-relative foster care in the 14-16 age range. IAYPIC's role was to organise and facilitate the Forum. Right from the beginning an integral part of the success of this project was the support and commitment given by the HSE Senior Management to the Forum. HSE Senior Management and Social Work Departments in North Dublin played an important role in supporting the Forum and assisting IAYPIC in gaining access to young people in foster care.

The aim of the Forum was to promote the participation of and give a voice to young people in foster care in the North Dublin area on issues that affect their care. 8 young people chose to participate in the Forum. The Forum met a total of 8 times on Saturdays between July and December 2010. The young people set the agenda of work for the Forum by identifying and agreeing the 4 topics for discussion. The topics chosen were:

- ◆ Garda Clearance
- ◆ Placement with Relatives/ Non-Relatives
- ◆ Feeling Different
- ◆ Access

The Facilitators guided the young people through each session, covering one topic per session. Throughout the sessions the issue of Social Workers came up on a number of occasions. Although this was not identified initially as a topic for discussion it was agreed by the young people that what they had to say about their experience of Social Workers merited inclusion in this report.

An essential pre-requisite to setting up the Forum was the commitment given by Senior Management within the HSE to listen to the views of the young people participating in the Forum and to provide feedback to them if and where their views could be used to influence training, practice and policy.

This was essential to the success of the Forum and ensured that it did not become a tokenistic experience for the young people who chose to participate.

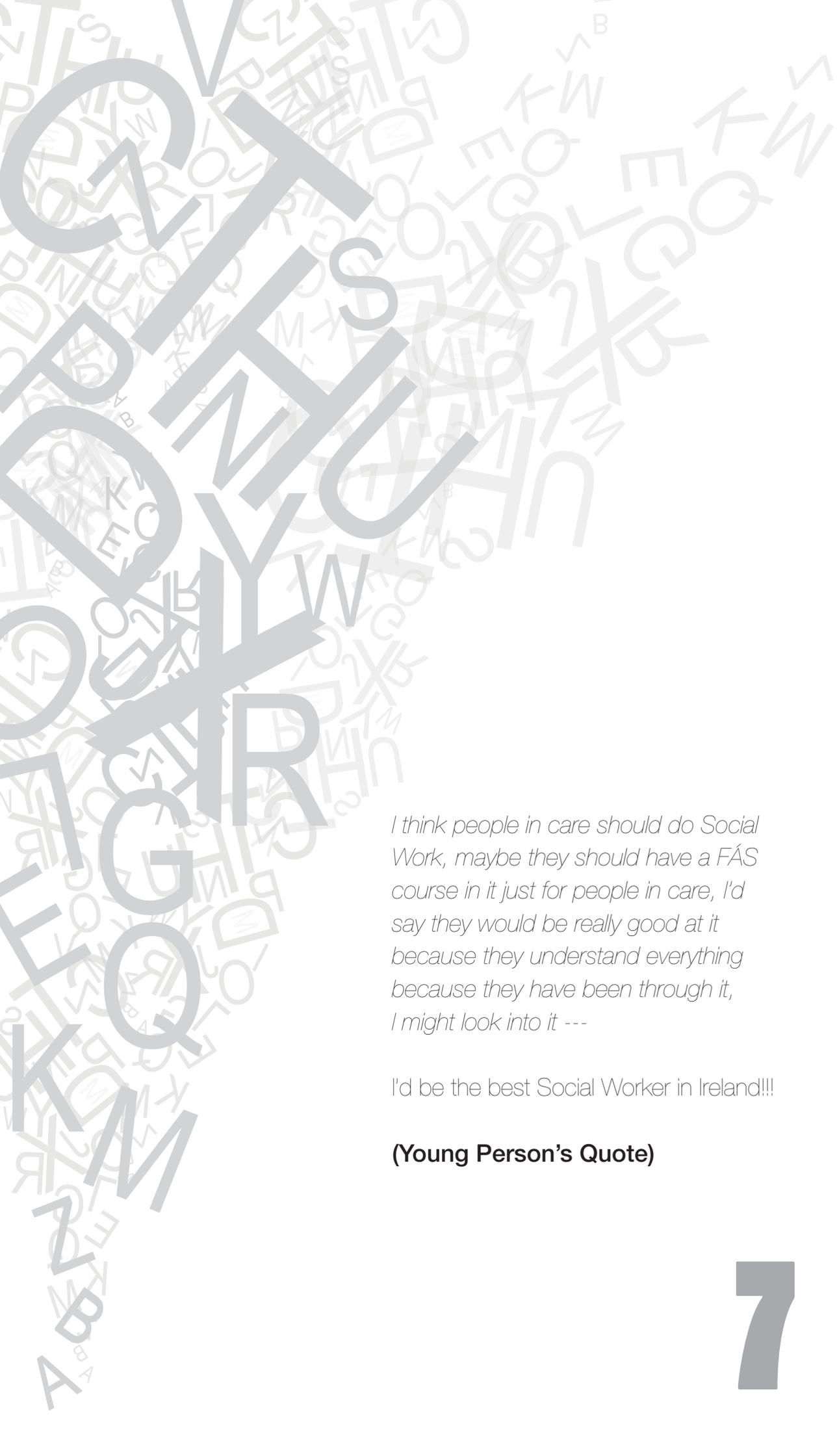


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I think people in care should do Social Work, maybe they should have a FÁS course in it just for people in care, I'd say they would be really good at it because they understand everything because they have been through it, I might look into it ---

I'd be the best Social Worker in Ireland!!!

(Young Person's Quote)

BACKGROUND TO THE FORUM

In 2006 The Irish Association of Young People in Care (IAYPIC) employed two Children's Rights & Participation Officers with funding provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) North Dublin. The role of the Children's Rights & Participation Officers is to advocate for and promote the rights and needs of young people in care. Through consultation with the HSE North Dublin it was agreed that one of the initial aims of this project would be to gather the views of young people in foster care as service users through the establishment of a Forum for Young People in Care. As part of their remit the Children's Rights & Participation Officers were asked by the HSE to establish and oversee such a Forum.

In its National Strategy for Service User involvement,¹ the HSE highlights the need to involve service users, especially those whose voices are seldom heard. Ireland ratified the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1992 and therefore has an International obligation to seek the views of young people. Under Article 12 of the *UNCRC* it states that children 'will have a voice in all matters affecting them'. Encouraging participation by young people in foster care is a positive step towards Ireland fulfilling its international duties.²

Through its work IAYPIC has identified a particular need to hear the views of young people in foster care³. It is widely acknowledged that it is difficult to access the views of young people in foster care and they are rarely consulted about service planning and development⁴. Through meeting with young people in the North Dublin area it also became evident that young people in foster care were less likely to have a Social Worker than young people in residential care settings. IAYPIC also identified young people in relative foster placements as a particularly vulnerable group with often limited access to support services.



¹ See Health Service Executive and Department of Health and Children, 2008, National Strategy for Service User Involvement: 7

² Proposal for a 'Forum for Young People in Foster care' in Dublin North, HSE in association with The Irish Association of Young People in Care, 2009.

³ Community Services Commission, 'Voice of Children and Young People in Foster Care', NSW, 2000.

⁴ Chapman, Adriana, W. and Barth, R; 2004: 294; Gilbertson, R. and Barber, J.G; 2002: 253; and Health Service Executive, 2005: 4. (see references)



The target group proposed for inclusion in the Forum were young people in both relative and non-relative foster care in the 14-16 age range. IAYPIC's role was to organise and facilitate the Forum. Right from the beginning an integral part of the success of this project was the support and commitment given by the HSE Senior Management to the Forum. HSE Senior Management and Social Work Departments in North Dublin played an important role in supporting the Forum and assisting IAYPIC in gaining access to young people in foster care.

Aim Of The Forum

- ◆ To promote the participation of and give a voice to young people in foster care in the North Dublin area on issues that affect their care.

Objectives

- ◆ To give young people in foster care the opportunity to identify and discuss different aspects of the service provided to them by the HSE and raise issues of concern to them.
- ◆ To provide young people an opportunity to feedback the views, issues and concerns they identified to Senior Management within the HSE.
- ◆ To ensure that young people's views are heard by HSE Senior Management and practitioners and are used to influence policy, practice and training where possible.

PLANNING

Steering Committee

A Steering Committee was set up in October 2009 to oversee the planning and development of the Forum. The purpose of the Steering Committee was to ensure a coordinated approach and partnership between IAYPIC and the HSE and to guide the preparation and running of the Forum. Interested and committed individuals were approached to form the Steering Committee and included HSE representatives from each of the 3 HSE Areas in North Dublin.

Membership of the Steering Committee was as follows:

- ◆ Social worker
- ◆ Fostering link worker
- ◆ Social work team leader
- ◆ Monitor for foster care
- ◆ Young person with care experience
- ◆ Community Social Care Worker
- ◆ IAYPIC Director
- ◆ 2 Children's Rights & Participation Officers (IAYPIC)

Role of the Steering Committee

- ◆ To support and advocate for IAYPIC in setting up a Forum for Young People In Care
- ◆ To monitor and guide the progress of the Forum
- ◆ To facilitate communication between the HSE and IAYPIC
- ◆ To assist IAYPIC to access young people in foster care

The Steering Committee met 8 times between October 2009 and December 2010. Members of the Steering Committee also had a crucial role to play in the planning stages of the Forum by providing a link between IAYPIC and the HSE. The Steering Committee assisted IAYPIC to gain access to young people in foster care. The Steering Committee was also consulted by the facilitators during the life of the Forum to give guidance and direction as required.



The Facilitators.

As IAYPIC was taking the lead on the Forum it was decided from an early stage that the two Children's Rights & Participation Officers would be the facilitators for all the sessions with the young people. Both facilitators in their role of Children's Rights & Participation Officers within IAYPIC have considerable experience of working with young people in group settings, have knowledge of the childcare system and best practice guidelines⁵.

A third facilitator was identified to attend the Forum and act as a support to the young people. The third facilitator was available to the young people in the event that they became upset, needed a little extra assistance during the sessions or needed to be taken home due to illness. The third facilitator also took responsibility in providing the young people with correct and accurate information in relation to their questions and queries. The information provided was based on local policy and guidelines, HSE, North Dublin and The National Standards for Foster Care, 2003.

The Venue

The Office of the Ombudsman for Children (OCO) was identified by the facilitators at an early stage as the most suitable venue for the Forum meetings to be held. The city centre location facilitated transport arrangements and the variety of bright, spacious, youth friendly work spaces made it an ideal environment for the working Forum.

Identifying Young People To Participate In The Forum

As IAYPIC does not have direct access to young people in foster care, commitment from the Principal Social Workers, Team Leaders and Social Workers was essential to the success of the Forum. Members of the Steering Committee became the key link between IAYPIC and the HSE and in accessing young people in foster care.

⁵ Proposal for a 'Forum for Young People in Foster Care' in Dublin North, HSE in association with The Irish Association of Young People in Care, 2009.

The Monitor for Foster Care made contact with the Principal Social Workers, informing them of the Forum, and requesting their support. Contact was then made with the Social Work Team Leaders and information meetings were held between the facilitators, individual Social Work and Fostering Teams. The purpose of the meetings was to provide information to each of the Teams about the Forum and to ask them to identify young people aged between 14–16 in relative/non-relative foster care who they felt would participate in a Forum. The Social Workers then had an initial discussion with the young people and their Foster Carers about their possible participation in the Forum. The names and contact details of 20 young people who expressed an interest were forwarded on to the facilitators.

Preparing the Young People

During May and early June 2010 appointments were made by the facilitators to meet with each of the 20 young people who had expressed an interest in the Forum. The aim of the meeting was to explain the purpose of the Forum in greater detail, discuss the level of commitment required by the young people to the Forum and to answer any questions the young people might have. Each young person was provided with an information pack containing information about the Forum and about IAYPIC. Of the 20 young people initially identified, 9 chose to take part in the Forum. They included 5 females and 4 males, 2 from North West Dublin, 6 from Dublin North Central and 1 from North Dublin.⁶



⁶ Following the first session one young person chose not to proceed any further with the Forum. A Facilitator met with the young person to discuss their decision to leave the Forum

FACILITATING THE SESSIONS

The Process

The Forum for Young People in Care met a total of 8 times on Saturdays between July and December 2010. Attendance during the months of July and August fell mainly due to the young people going on their summer holidays. Feedback from the young people contained in this report relates to the issues discussed by young people who attended each session.

Initially it was planned for each session to run for 2 hours with a 15 to 20 minute break. However, as the Forum progressed, it became apparent that more time was required. With the agreement of the young people sessions 4 to 8 were extended to 3 hours.

Prior to each Forum meeting the facilitators:

- ◆ Sent a text message reminding the young people of the date of the meeting. A text was also sent to the young person after each meeting thanking them for their participation
- ◆ Sent a letter to the Foster Carers reminding them of the date of each Forum meeting and inviting them to make contact if they had any queries or concerns about the Forum

The roles of lead facilitator and the person recording the meetings were alternated at each of the Forum sessions. Recording each of the 4 sessions was done using a digital recorder and a flip chart. Recording on the flip chart was always done in full view of the young people. At the end of each session the facilitators asked the young people if they would like the written notes read back to them.

The Agenda

The young people set the agenda of work for the Forum by identifying and agreeing the 4 topics for discussion. At the first session the young people participated in a brain storming session, during which they identified the following 12 headings as the topics they would like to discuss at the Forum:

- ◆ Garda Clearance
- ◆ Confidentiality and trusting your Social Worker
- ◆ Care Plans
- ◆ Access
- ◆ Not feeling listened to
- ◆ Feeling different
- ◆ HSE budgets
- ◆ Public impression of young people in care
- ◆ Placement with Relatives/ Non-Relatives
- ◆ Placement assessment
- ◆ Social Workers
- ◆ Review Meetings

Each young person was then provided with colour stickers and asked to place a sticker alongside their first four preference topics. The 4 topics with the highest number of votes were:

- ◆ Garda Clearance
- ◆ Placement with Relatives/ Non-Relatives
- ◆ Feeling different
- ◆ Access

The Facilitators guided the young people through each session, covering one topic per session. Throughout the sessions the issue of Social Workers came up on a number of occasions. Although this was not identified as a topic for discussion in the first session it was agreed by the young people that what they had to say about their experience of Social Workers merited inclusion in this report.

STRUCTURE OF THE SESSIONS

Initially it was planned to hold 7 sessions in total with the young people. This would be comprised of an introductory session, 4 sessions to discuss each of the 4 topics and 2 sessions to prepare the young people for the meeting with the HSE. An additional session was added to allow the young people to prepare to meet with the HSE. The 8 sessions were structured as follows:

SESSION 1

Introductions
Setting the agenda
Agree the ground rules
Identify issues that affect young people in foster care
Agree on 4 topics for discussion

SESSION 2

Topic for discussion: *Garda Clearance*

SESSION 3

Topic for discussion: *Placement with Relatives / Non-Relatives*

SESSION 4

Topic for discussion: *Feeling different*

SESSION 5

Topic for discussion: *Access*⁷ -
Title of the report - Discussed and decided on
Content of the report
Structure of the report
Graphic design of the Report

SESSION 6

Topic for discussion: *Access*
Preparation of the young people for the meeting with the HSE

SESSION 7

Preparation of the young people for the meeting with the HSE.
This meeting was attended by The Ombudsman for Children, Emily Logan, who explained to the young people about the role of The Ombudsman for Children and the responsibilities that go with it. The Ombudsman then spent time assisting the young people to prepare for their meeting with the HSE.

SESSION 8

Preparation of the young people for the meeting with the HSE⁸

⁷ Topic for discussion: Access postponed to Session 6 due to poor attendance on the day.

⁸ Additional session added to assist the young people to prepare for their meeting with the HSE representatives.



Planning and debriefing

Two planning meetings were held prior to each session. The facilitators planned the format for the session, taking into consideration the topic for discussion, creative ways of working with the young people, group dynamics and the young people's feedback from previous sessions.

Following each session the facilitators held a debriefing meeting. This was important particularly in the early stages, as it helped to address any potential problems and fine tune other areas. The issues addressed included group dynamics, suitability of the work space, group activities, meeting points, timing, missed meetings, refreshments, facilitators' role and observations.

Feedback and follow up by the HSE

An essential pre-requisite to setting up the Forum was the commitment given by Senior Management within the HSE to listen to the views of the young people participating in the Forum and to provide feedback to them if and where their views could be used to influence training, practice and policy. This was essential to the success of the Forum and ensured that it did not become a tokenistic experience for the young people who chose to participate.

The young people themselves decided on the way they would like to present their views to the HSE. They decided they would invite representatives from the HSE to attend a meeting with them at which they would present their report.

At this meeting the HSE will be asked to inform the young people when and how they intend providing feedback to them on the different issues they have raised.

Recommendations

IAYPIC would recommend the setting up of an ongoing structure for a formal, permanent Forum for young people in care. Such a structure could allow for and bring about changes in implementing, wherever possible, changes in policy and practice as identified by young people in care. The Forum would provide the young people with a voice and a direct say in issues that affect their care.

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Introduction

We are a group of eight young people in Relative and Non-Relative foster care. We came together to set up a Forum for Young People in Care so that the HSE, Dublin North, could hear our views and opinions.

We gave up one Saturday morning a month from July to December 2010, except in November, when we had two meetings!! We came together to discuss topics we felt were important to us as young people in foster care.

We decided on four topics that we were going to discuss:

- ◆ Garda Clearance
- ◆ Placement with Relatives/ Non-Relatives
- ◆ Feeling Different
- ◆ Access

We have also included a section on Social Workers, as Social Workers came up a lot throughout our discussions.

We talked about our own experiences, and we came up with different suggestions for changes we would like to see happen within the HSE and some questions that we would like to put to the HSE. Through the Forum we met with other young people in foster care, we made friends and had fun.

We put a lot of hard work into the Forum. We hope that our views, opinions and suggestions for change are listened to and taken seriously and our questions are answered. We also hope that by taking part in the Forum we might help improve things for other young people in foster care in the future.

There are always at least two sides to every story and we feel it is time you heard 'Our Side'.

SESSION 1

Garda Clearance

*There
are always at least
two sides to every story
and we feel it is time you heard
'Our Side'.*

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A black silhouette of a woman's head in profile, facing left. Her hair is depicted as a dense, chaotic mass of black lines, suggesting tangled thoughts or a complex situation. The silhouette is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.

As a group we decided to discuss this topic because it is a big part of young people's lives in care.

Our understanding and experience of Garda Clearance

- ◆ Although most of us had heard of Garda Clearance we didn't really have a clear understanding of what it meant until it was explained to us.
- ◆ Some of us thought that we needed to get permission from the Gardaí if we wanted to go away with friends or stay in someone else's house. Some of us even thought that the Gardaí go to your house and watch you.

Through our group discussion we found that different people had different experiences:

- ◆ One young person was told by their Social Worker that if they wanted to go babysitting, the family needed to be Garda cleared, even though the house was just down the road and they wouldn't be staying overnight.
- ◆ Another young person was told by their Social Worker that if they wanted to go for a sleepover with their best friend who lived across the road, the family would have to get Garda Clearance.
- ◆ Another young person talked about going to lots of places with their friends and their friends' families and Garda clearance was never mentioned.
- ◆ This showed us that different Social Workers have different rules and this is **not fair**.

Foster carers should have more of a say!

- ◆ Some of us knew that our foster parents could make arrangements about who cares for us for up to 72 hours. One of the group said that they knew nothing about the 72 hour rule.
- ◆ As a group we think that our foster carers should have more of a say. So, if you are living with your foster family for more than five years, they should be able to decide who you can stay with and for how long without people having to have Garda clearance.

Changes we would like to see happen:

1. Social Workers should be trained to be more informed and give out the right information.
2. Social Workers should not have different interpretations as to what the rules are.
3. Young people in foster care should have a book about 'Our Rights' and what we are entitled to know.
4. Garda clearance should be dealt with more quickly and prioritised when it is needed.
5. Foster carers should have more of a say and be more entitled to make decisions about their foster children.

Our questions for the HSE

1. Why can't Garda Clearance be prioritised for young people in foster care and dealt with quicker?
2. Why don't we have a book about 'Our Rights' and what we're entitled to know?
3. Why can't our foster parents have more of a say about who we see and spend time with?

Conclusion

We need to get clear information about Garda Clearance. We need to understand what Garda Clearance means and why it is needed. We should all be getting the same information from our Social Workers about Garda Clearance.

Garda Clearance – What we have to say!

We should have something so we know exactly what we can do and can't do

It's invading family privacy

If you are going away with your friends the Gardai have to go and check with the family

I was told that even if I was going for a sleepover for a night they needed Garda clearance

I think the main fault with Garda clearance is the actual information you get from your Social Worker

It should be down to your foster parents to know the people you are staying with

I think the 72 hour rule makes sense

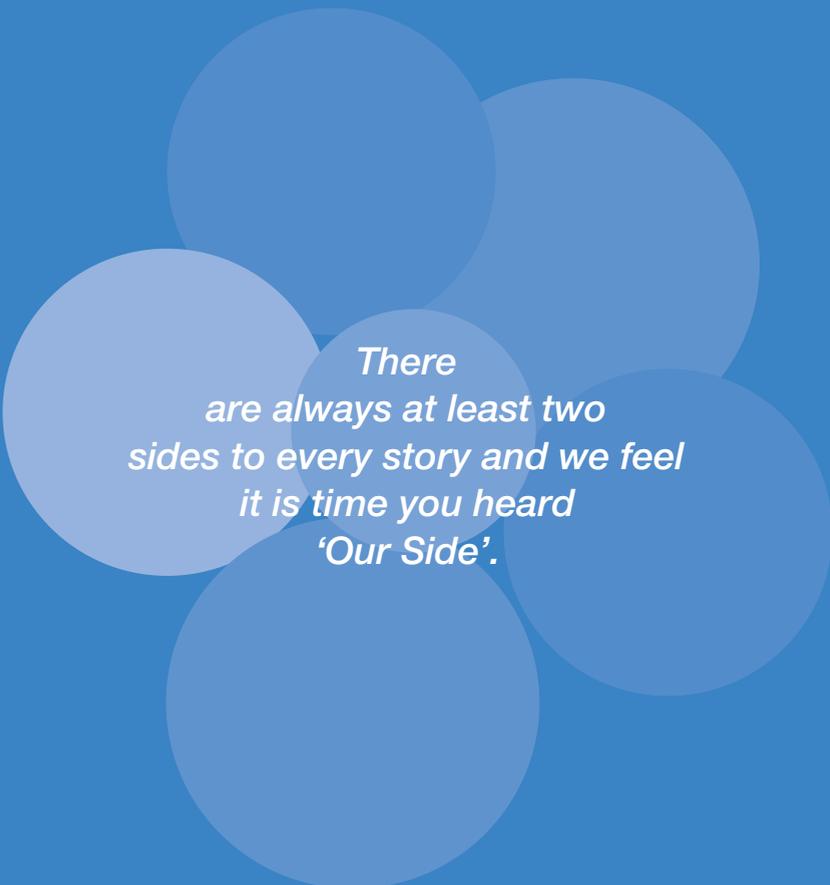
Staying
in your friend's house for
three days is a long time,
if your Social Worker is not asking questions,
your ma and da should be

Foster
parents should
have more rights
over you

I was told I couldn't babysit and it
is only four doors down from my
house, she (Social Worker) said
they had to have Garda clearance

Foster parents should
have more input

It's
kinda stupid being
Garda cleared anyway, I don't
get it, people out there in foster care
have to be Garda cleared, my friend
comes to my house and there's no
Garda clearance, it just makes you
feel different, we are responsible
young people!



*There
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sides to every story and we feel
it is time you heard
'Our Side'.*

SESSION 2

Placement with
Relatives/
Non-Relatives

We had lots to say about placement with Relatives / Non-Relatives (Family/Non-Family members⁹). We chose this topic because we feel that where possible placement with a relative should always be considered before placement with a non-relative.

- ◆ Some of our group were fostered by relatives and others were fostered by non-relatives. We all agreed that Social Workers should always look to place you with a relative first and that you should always be involved in that decision.
- ◆ Some of us thought that you should get to meet the relative and the foster carer and get to know them first, and then make the choice. Another young person in our group talked about being given a choice, but not knowing what choice to make.
- ◆ As a group we all understood that it might not always be possible to be fostered by a relative because they might have the same problems as your own family, or you just might not get on with them. We still thought that it was important that Social Workers go to your relatives first to see if they can care for you.
- ◆ Our group felt that if you were fostered by a relative you should still have a Social Worker but that you wouldn't need your Social Worker as much as someone in non-relative foster care. We thought that because you are family and are related to them, they would know you and your situation better than strangers would. You would settle better because they are your family and they would know how to handle you.
- ◆ We also thought that just because you were fostered by a relative, it doesn't mean that it will always work out. You might have a fight with them or, because it's your family, things might become too relaxed and that mightn't be a good thing.

- ◆ Some of us talked about our experience of being placed in temporary homes and emergency hostels. One of the young people talked about being in 8 temporary placements and having to pack and unpack, make new friends then having to leave it all behind. Another one of our group talked of his experience of being placed in emergency hostels between placements. He felt that this was wrong and that young people should not be placed with other young people who may be using drugs.

Changes we would like to see happen:

1. Give us more choice in where we want to live.
2. Don't rush us.
3. Explain things better to us.

Our questions for the HSE

1. Why don't Social Workers always look to place you with your relatives first?
2. Why do we sometimes have to stay in temporary placements because it just makes you feel unsettled?
3. Why are we not told how long are we going to be placed in care for?

Conclusion

We would like to have more of a say about where and with whom we are placed. We would like our Social Workers to look at placing us with our families where possible. Please don't rush us and take time to explain things to us.

Placement with Relatives/Non-Relatives

With your family you feel much better like and you know they'll never let you down and all that

Maybe most of the family have problems like your own family

Your family know you and you feel more comfortable

Having contact with your extended family is important cause even if you can't talk to your foster parents you can talk to your ma or da or aunties or uncles or whatever family you have around

Out of hours is stupid, you shouldn't have to go through this

I think people living with non-relative foster parents need a Social Worker more because say if you broke down, your foster family wouldn't know how to control you because they are not family and wouldn't know what you were like

Why aren't we told the correct length of time that we'll be staying in foster care?

I don't think they should rush you because the child has a big heavy load on him already and he knows that he can't live with his parents anymore. They're just giving him more information that he just can't handle. Then they wonder why he goes a little bit crazy

When you first go into care they lie to you because they say you're only going in for two or three weeks but then you actually stay until you're eighteen

– What we have to say!

You should be placed with family members first

It's like being homeless, always carrying bags with you and stuff to put all your clothes in

It's ridiculous the way you get put into temporary homes. I was in eight of them, in and out. I think you should just be placed in one. Like you unpack then you have to pack again, you make friends and then you have to leave.

Because they're your family, they're your blood. It's different with strangers, because they are strangers to you

You should still have a Social Worker because you're in care and because you've lost something or something has happened to you. You do need to be kept an eye on

If you don't take drugs but are put into emergency hostels with other people who are taking drugs, this is wrong, there should be somewhere better

You still need a Social Worker in case you didn't get on with your family

I was living with my aunt and uncle and it didn't work out



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SESSION 3

Feeling Different

We decided to talk about Feeling Different as sometimes people look at us in a negative way because we are in foster care. These are some of the ways we thought a young person in foster care might feel different from their friends who aren't in foster care.

<i>Lonely</i>
<i>Left out</i>
<i>You have to get Garda clearance</i>
<i>Sad</i>
<i>Isolated</i>
<i>Think your friends are more loved than you</i>
<i>Unsettled</i>
<i>Nervous going to school</i>
<i>Shy</i>
<i>They might get bullied because of their situation</i>
<i>It can be difficult to make friends</i>
<i>They can't see their family all the time</i>
<i>They can't have a real family</i>
<i>They might have a different religion than other people</i>
<i>Afraid of being judged</i>
<i>You can feel more vulnerable</i>
<i>You might be treated differently because of your situation</i>
<i>You don't look like the family you live with</i>
<i>Teased for your accent</i>
<i>Teased for looking different</i>
<i>Can't go on school trips because their birth parents don't sign the forms on time</i>

- ◆ Some of our group felt that not all people in foster care feel different.
- ◆ Some of the young people talked about having a different surname to their foster parents and having to explain to people why it's different.

- ◆ As a group we discussed the importance of making friends. Others described having to be careful what you say to people. Some of the young people said eventually they stopped telling people they were in foster care.
- ◆ One young person talked about how he and his sister were only due to stay with the foster family for three weeks and they ended up staying for two months. It started to get really good and then they were moved.
- ◆ Another young person talked about seeing friends having good relationships with their families and wishing they had that with their family. They described their friends having good relationships with their dads, but not feeling they could have that relationship with their foster dad.

During this session we talked about the fact that sometimes people can have a negative view of young people in care. The media also tends to print all the bad things about young people in care and rarely looks at the positive things that are going on in our lives. This is what we would like to read about in the Daily Newspaper about young people in foster care:



Conclusion

Young people in foster care are no different to other young people. Just because we are in care should not mean that we should feel or get treated differently from others. We want to live normal lives, hang out with our friends, have hobbies and do everyday things. We need you to think about this when you make decisions that affect our care.

Feeling Different– What we have to say!

Not all people in foster care feel different, just some

Eventually I stopped telling people things

You have to be careful what you say

The weirdest thing that happened to me was when I went to the doctor with my foster mam and the doctor said I look like my foster mam

You see your friends having a real good relationship with their da, but you couldn't do all that with your foster dad, cos you feel you couldn't

You can't have a proper family like your own family

You have a different surname to your foster parents and you have to tell people why it's different

You see your friends having a real good relationship with their families and you think 'I wish I had that'

If you make friends, everything's grand

Young ones scream at you---'at least my ma loves me, I'm not in foster care'

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*There
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sides to every story and we feel
it is time you heard
'Our Side'.*

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SESSION

Access

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We chose to talk about Access because we think it is very important to have contact with your birth family. It is important to be able to spend time with your family and to be able to communicate with them.

Our experience of Access and what Access means to us

- ◆ We all had a different experience of how much time we get for access:
 - ◆ Some of us have pretty regular access maybe once a week and this might be for a sleepover.
 - ◆ One young person could see their family whenever they wanted.
 - ◆ Another young person could only see his mother twice a month and they were not allowed sleepovers.
 - ◆ One young person said the older they got the more their access increased.
- ◆ Another young person described how they ran away from their foster placement a couple of times over their access arrangements. This young person felt like they couldn't talk to anyone as they wouldn't change their access for them.
- ◆ As a group we discussed how important it is to spend time with your old friends after all they were the people you have grown up with. One young person in the group said that he had made new friends but that was his own choice. Some of us get to see our friends at weekends when we are home on Access. Some of us could make our own arrangements about seeing our friends.

- ◆ Some of our group felt that they fitted in better in their old school because they had friends from their own area. Two of us agreed that when you move from town to another area that sometimes people think that you are a 'scum bag'. When you move out of town it can seem like a very long way from where you came from.
- ◆ Another young person said that due to the cutbacks in the HSE his transport arrangements for access had been reduced to once a week.
- ◆ One of our group said they had experienced supervised access. This young person also said that they had access in Barnardos. There was a kitchen where you could cook food and eat it with your family. Another young person said that they had access in a room that looked like a Garda Interview room.
- ◆ Some of the young people had access in the family home, others described going out with their mother to a café or the park. Two of the young people said that sometimes their mothers didn't have much money to spend doing fun things with them. They said that sitting around or being stuck in the house or flat can get awkward and boring.
- ◆ Another young person felt that we do not get enough time for access and that a three hour access visit was ridiculous because you just don't have enough time to spend with your family and friends, particularly if you are a teenager. This young person did understand that sometimes there are reasons why young people can only spend a certain amount of time with their families.
- ◆ Social Workers shouldn't make decisions about our access based on how our families were in the past. They should look at how things are going for our families right now and then decide on our access arrangements.

- ◆ Some of the young people in our group said that even though they like to see their mothers, they would not like to live with their mothers again because they are well looked after in their foster placements. They live in nice houses, they get good food and they get a good education. Two of the young people said they would have ended up in trouble if they had stayed living with their mothers.

Changes we would like to see happen:

1. Access should be for a minimum of four hours.
2. Go through the access plan with the young person and their family.
3. Social Workers should review young people's access arrangements on a regular basis with the young person and listen to what the young person has to say about their access.
4. The Judge should listen to the young person. The Judge should have to read a statement from the young person in court (in cases where access is court ordered).

Our questions for the HSE

1. Who decides the time young people can spend with their birth parents?
2. Why don't Social Workers listen to us more about how we feel about our access arrangements?

Conclusion

We think it is important that you ask us how much time we would like to spend with our birth family and our old friends. We would like to feel that we are listened to and our views are taken on board and considered when we ask for changes in our access arrangements.

Access – What we have to say!

Some children might not be happy with their access because some other children might get to see their parents more because their parents are in a different situation

I have made new friends, I know me friends six years so, I don't really bother with me old friends any more for different reasons – that was me own choice, that wasn't me auntie's choice, I could have seen them if I wanted to but I chose not to

Since the HSE went into recession, they have less funds to deal with, they used to pay for a taxi up and down from ---- for me, now they can only afford to do it once a week for me, which is quite hard because I have to carry two bags, me school bag and me gear bag with me clothes and stuff

I lived in town all me life, when you move out to somewhere else they all think ah he's a "scum bag" stay away from him

I ran away three times from my foster family because I felt so strongly about it I couldn't talk to anyone because they wouldn't change anything. I had already tried to talk to them

To a Social Worker a few years is nothing but to a child who wants to see their parents a few years is everything. At fifteen I really want to go and see me ma all the time and the Social Worker says 'no I am not dealing with this now' and doesn't do anything for that whole year, that's a whole year wasted, something could have been done in that year, something big could have changed

When you reach the age of 15 or 16 they should ask you and you should have a choice of how much time do you want to spend on access and do you want weekend access, I don't think it should be up to the age of 18

Obviously there are reasons if you are only able to spend three hours with your parents. There is obviously a reason the Social Workers are taking that decision and you only get to see your parents for three hours. It could be like your parents are sick and can't take care of you whatever



I'm only allowed see me ma twice a month and I am not even allowed stay over, it's only two hours twice a month

I know that its terrible to say even now, and it's kinda selfish but if I actually got the chance to go back to mum in the morning I would say no

When I was younger and I was leaving me ma I used to get really upset on a Sunday because that is when I had to go, I used to feel guilty that I had to go, I felt like it was my fault because I was leaving. I think access is very important particularly when you are younger, when you are older you don't have that same connection with your parents

They should ask your parents if she's able or he's able or they are both able to take care of you for more then a certain time



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SESSION **5**

Social Workers

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As we said in our introduction we did not choose Social Workers as one of our 4 topics for discussion but it did come up a lot as we worked through our sessions. As a group we decided to include our experience of Social Workers in this report.

- ◆ A few of us talked about the good times we had with our Social Workers. One of the young people described their Social Worker as 'deadly' and kind. Another young person spoke about their Social Worker listening to them and following up on things for them. Some of the young people thought it was important to do fun things with your Social Worker; things shouldn't always have to be so serious.
- ◆ Some of us have only ever had female Social Workers and we thought it might be nice to have a male Social Worker. Another young person said that sometimes it could be awkward if you are male and you have a female Social Worker.
- ◆ One of the young people said they never had a good Social Worker. Another young person spoke about their Social Worker cancelling appointments at the last minute. The young person said this annoyed them as they could have done other things like spending time with their friends.
- ◆ The main problem that we saw was that different Social Workers give us different information. We think that Social Workers need to be properly informed so that we are all being told the same thing.
- ◆ We want Social Workers to be straight with us and tell us the exact length of time we are going to be in foster care instead of saying that it's just for a few weeks when you may actually end up staying there until you are eighteen.
- ◆ One young person spoke about their Social Worker changing every few months and how it was hard having to talk to a new Social Worker as you don't know them very well. The young person thought you would nearly be as well not having a Social Worker at all.

- ◆ Some of the group thought that we did need a Social Worker because we are in care. One of the young people thought that Social Workers should give us more time to think and not to give us loads of information together.
- ◆ Social Workers can interfere in our lives and are sometimes too over-protective. One of the young people said that sometimes you might have to see your Social Worker a little more because you need to at that time.
- ◆ We talked about at what age Social Workers should talk directly to us. Some of us thought it depended on your level of maturity. Some of us thought that at 12 or 13 we can handle the information the Social Worker needs to give us or talk to us about.
- ◆ We talked about the forms that Social Workers use with us. A few of the group thought that the forms and the questions you were asked were very childish.

Social Workers should close their eyes and try and think how a young person feels in foster care

- ◆ Some of us thought that Social Workers really don't understand what it is like for a young person to be in foster care. One of the young people said that Social Workers don't know how to relate to us.
- ◆ Another young person thought that Social Workers should do special training so that they can understand how young people in foster care feel and learn how best to deal with that young person.

Conclusion

Social Workers really need to be consistent and tell us all the same information. When your Social Worker changes it is hard having to get to know a new Social Worker and tell your story all over again. Don't be afraid to tell us things we need to know. Listen to what we have to say and help us to get on with our lives the same as the average teenager.

Social Workers – What we have to say!

I think Social Workers need to be informed properly so we are all told the same thing

Social Workers should give better information

Social Workers should give you the right information

They should have a book of the rules and guidelines for Social Workers so that they don't have different interpretations about the rules

We should have more groups I used to go to one every week and you got to sit down with loads of people in care and you could talk to them all so much easier cause they can all relate to you cause Social Workers can't, they think they can but they just can't

Social Workers should be trained so they are more informed

I don't think you should have a Social Worker cause social workers are interfering in your life. Even if you're in a foster family you still have a life and you want to get on with things and Social Workers are stopping you from doing your own thing. I know they want to make sure you are safe, but they're kinda too over protective

They keep changing Social Workers every few months, that's what happened to me and it's kinda hard to talk to every Social Worker cause you don't know them very well, but I think it would stop all that hassle if you didn't have a Social Worker

I think
Social Workers should be
put on special training---I know they
are really, really trained but they should be
trained to do other things, like they should take a
psychology course, a course that helps them
understand how a child is feeling now
and how to deal with it

When
I was younger
- they did listen, one of my
Social Worker was great,
on the ball all the time, if
you phoned her and ask for
something to be done it was
done perfectly

I was asked to draw a
picture about how I felt
(forms)

If you have a girl Social
Worker you're saying
'what will I say next'? they
go awkward and then they
go quiet

The form had a
question 'are you
pregnant?' and I'm a
bloke

Social Workers should make
it fun for the child so they don't
have a big heavy load with all the
serious stuff. Make it fun for the
child so that they can understand
things better

Young people's experience of taking part in the Forum



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In the final working session of the Forum the young people were asked to complete a short evaluation form. The purpose of the evaluation form was to receive feedback from the young people who had participated in the Forum about what it was like for them to take part. Six young people completed evaluation forms. Information is presented here on the following 3 issues:

- ◆ Young people's motivation for taking part and what they hoped to get out of it
- ◆ Which aspects of the Forum young people enjoyed most
- ◆ Their views on a future Forum for young people in care.

Obtaining young people's views is important information in itself but it can also help to inform the format and structure of Fora in the future.

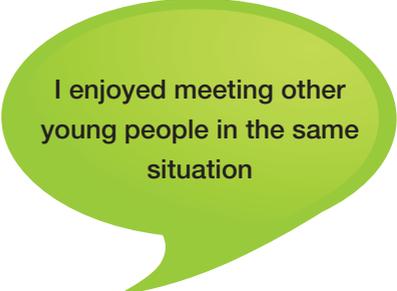
Young people's reasons for taking part

There were two main reasons given by young people for taking part in the Forum.

- ◆ **To improve the lives of young people in care;**
- ◆ **To have the opportunity to make their voices heard and hear what other young people had to say;**

Therefore, young people were keen to make a contribution by taking part in the Forum, as well as being able to make their views known. In addition, 2 young people said they were keen to learn from the experience of taking part in the Forum.





I enjoyed meeting other young people in the same situation

Enjoyable aspects of the Forum for young people

The most enjoyable aspect of taking part in the Forum was the social aspect of meeting other young people in care and making new friends. This was stated by 5 young people. Some of them also said that they enjoyed sharing information and learning from each other's experiences.

One young person said that she enjoyed **“being able to get everything off your chest”**.

When asked if there was anything that they did not like about the Forum, all of the young people responded 'no' except for one young person who said that she missed having her time on Saturday mornings, she also said that 'it paid off'.

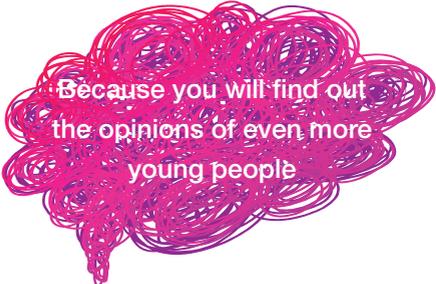
Young people's views on a future Forum for young people in care

When asked if there should be more Fora for young people in care in Ireland, all 6 young people agreed. In particular, some young people felt it was important to consult with more young people as they acknowledged that other young people might have different points of view to their own.

Similarly, all 6 young people said that they would participate in any future Forum for young people in care.

A possible topic for discussion in a future Forum might be Social Workers. When the young people were asked if there was anything that they would have liked to spend more time on in the current Forum, both responses given referred to Social Workers in terms of talking to them and ensuring they have correct information to give to young people.

Overall, young people enjoyed taking part in the Forum. Their main motivation for taking part was to improve the lives of young people in care and to make their voices heard. All of the young people who took part were keen that future Fora would take place so that more young people in care would have the opportunity to have a say about important issues that affect their lives in care.



Because you will find out the opinions of even more young people

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IAYPIC, 7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7

PH: 01-8727661/Fax: 01-8727652

Mobile 087-903 6598 (for text messages)

email to info@iaypic.ie

www.iaypic.ie