

Submission to the Review of “National Policy and Procedure for Aftercare”

Focus Ireland is one of the leading providers of aftercare support to young people leaving care in Ireland. This submission is based on the experience of our services across the country, and is drawn from our daily engagement with young people as their aftercare support.

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of the National Policy and Procedure for Aftercare. We believe it is timely after 5 years of implementation. We also recognize the importance of this review the forthcoming commencement of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015.

It is important to state at the outset that Focus Ireland believe that the National Policy and Procedure for Aftercare is a strong statement of intent to provide a continuum of high quality support to young people as they transition from care to adulthood.

However in its implementation there are a number of gaps, blocks and implementation issues that have come to the attention of our services since the policy came into being.

As a service provider we have noted particular difficulties with the implementation of policy and supporting young people who have left the care system which we will outline below. The issues or insights from our services have been placed under three headings, namely Resource Issues, Blocks and Gaps and Accessible Accommodation.

Resource Issues

Caseload

In the last few years, the system has moved to standard caseload of 25 cases per aftercare worker. In our experience, given the needs of the young people allocated to our services, this is proving to be unmanageable. The relevant KPI should not be simply whether each young person who needs an aftercare worker is allocated one, but whether that aftercare worker has the time to support the aftercare plan – and make a difference.

We believe that a more informed and flexible approach needs to be taken in relation to caseloads, based not on crude numbers but on the identified support needs of the young people.

Focus Ireland services experience suggest that caseloads should be set in the range of 15 to 20 with the variation in caseloads.

Standardised Aftercare Allowance

Allowances to care leavers should be linked to the cost of living and reviewed each year to reflect rising costs. In particular the current high and increasing cost of renting needs to be reflected in the financial support that is offered to young people leaving the care system. The issue here is not only that the housing specific payments (Rent Supplement and HAP) are inadequate to meet market rents, there are specific disadvantages which care leavers face when trying to get landlords to accept them which influence the rental they need to pay to get accommodation.

Blocks and Gaps

Preparation for Leaving Care Plans & Aftercare Plans

Preparation for leaving care must be given far greater emphasis in the policy and there must clearer direction on who is to carry out this work, what areas must be covered and what supports will be in place to facilitate it.

The lack of sufficient numbers of social workers engaging in aftercare preparation is seen in all of our services. In many cases preparation for leaving care, such as the development of life skills, is not being incorporated into care plans or placement plans, and this is particular evident in the residential care sector.

There must be a far greater emphasis on disseminating the policy and informing all relevant parties, especially social workers. For example, many social workers are unclear about what can or cannot be included in a financial plan.

Young people are coming to Focus Ireland services without an aftercare plan or with an aftercare plan which has been prepared at the last moment and doesn't reflect the needs of the young person. In some cases this is due to a complete breakdown where the young person has had little or no interaction with a social worker or where the social worker has a limited relationship with the young person and so the needs of the young person are not properly reflected in the aftercare plan. This can mean that the young person has no sense of ownership of their plan leading to skepticism on the part of the young person with regard to the process that can be difficult to overcome.

The vision in both the policy and the Childcare Act is that assessments and care plans are client centered working documents. To make this a reality there needs to be strong direction and the required resources in place to ensure that the engagement and crucial relationship building is in place from the young person's 16th year. This direction must come from social workers.

Roles

Following on from the previous heading Focus Ireland believes that within the National policy there is a need for greater clarity in section 2.3 which addresses roles and responsibility. While respecting the fact that there is overlap there is a need within the policy for a stronger and more directive statement as to the responsibilities of each worker.

Education

Focus Ireland recognises that value of continued education for young people leaving care. However our experience has been that a misapplied concentration on education can result in the absence of support for those who do not continue with education, so that the most vulnerable get the least support.

One consequences of this can be that a young person is encouraged to attend a course that they feel was pushed on them.

Another consequence of this is that the payment of financial supports is applied as an incentive to continue in education and withdrawn for those young people who do not continue in education. In reality, those young people who do not continue with education are often in greater need of support to access to personal development, training or labour market opportunities. Focus Ireland believes that young people who are not engaged in education should continue to be provided with aftercare supports appropriate to their particular needs in relation to, for instance, work experience or employment. This includes financial support especially.

There is a need for clear guidelines to be developed to ensure that this equal treatment is put in place for all young people leaving the care system who have support needs.

Disability Supports

Focus Ireland regularly see young people who have a disability (usually learning disability) that can mean that the young person has long term support needs but not at a level to qualify for disability services. There needs to be a stronger commitment within the policy to ensuring that young people with disabilities are linked with the appropriate services before they leave care and that these services will remain in place once they leave the care system.

Flexibility in Eligibility Criteria

Policy needs to change to reflect new legislation as eligibility within the policy is different to that within the legislation.

Focus Ireland services have seen a number of cases where it would be prudent and cost effective to continue an aftercare service beyond 21 (not in education) and 23 (in education). There needs to be

greater flexibility in these cases where it is clearly in the best interests of the young person to continue to provide support beyond the upper age limit.

Additionally we have seen cases where a young person comes into the care system after turning 17 and therefore does not have the required time in services to automatically qualify for aftercare support. While relatively small in number these young people can be some of the most vulnerable yet they can be the ones who transition directly from care to homelessness.

Some areas recognize that they have some flexibility in this regard, while other areas take the view that the guidelines are rigid and exclusive. The professional discretion of the Tusla staff involved in these marginal decisions should be made clear.

Standardised Aftercare Allowance

Focus Ireland believes that there is a need for stronger guidance on the use of the €300 euro to plan for move on.

While we acknowledge that the issue of the allowance being divided between the carer and young person is noted in the current guidance there is a variance of experiences seen by our services. This particularly applies in the case of foster placements. As an example, in one case money has been saved for a deposit and a month's rent for future accommodation, while in another case the young person is leaving with no financial reserves at all.

Independent Appeal Process

Young people don't have recourse to an independent appeals process in cases where they feel they have not received all the support they need. As is the case in all public services, this should be incorporated into the policy to facilitate confidence, best practice and consistency for provision of service across the country for young people.

Local Steering Committees

There is a need for multi-disciplinary teams/local steering committees to be put in place across the country.

Accommodation

In recent years, Focus Ireland experience is that the lack of suitable accommodation is the most significant issue that currently impacts on the successful support of young people leaving care. An assessment of the accommodation needs of care leavers accessing our services in March 2016 found that, of 181 young people, 13 were accessing homeless accommodation and a further 38 were in unsuitable or unstable accommodation.

Of the group only 41 (23%) had secured accommodation, this was predominantly in the private rental market.

Focus Ireland recognizes, in the current housing crisis, meeting the accommodation needs of young people leaving care requires a cross departmental effort. In particular the joint protocol on young people leaving care is an important opportunity to offer appropriate support to young people in and leaving the care system. To build on the framework that the protocol sets out Focus Ireland believes that the protocol should be revised and should put in place:

Systems to identify those ‘at risk of homelessness’

In order to ensure that those ‘at risk’ are identified and targeted by the protocol we believe that the Housing Authority along with TUSLA and appropriate stakeholders should develop and regularly review a robust definition and indicators for young people leaving care who are ‘at risk of homelessness’.

Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)

The most significant benefit of the protocol is that it affords the young person the opportunity to have their HAP in place from the date that they turn 18. However given the lack of move-on accommodation and the incompatibility of the HAP levels when compared to market rents it would be beneficial if the flexibility that is available to those experiencing homelessness (Homeless HAP) was extended to young people at leaving care and identified as ‘at risk’.

Access to supported accommodation

For some young people short episodes of homelessness may be unavoidable in the current circumstances, especially for those who are living in volatile or unstable family situations after they leave care. A significant proportion of young people in Focus Ireland’s aftercare services fall into this category.

In these cases, it would be a far less damaging experience if they could be accommodated in STA (Supported Temporary Accommodation) rather than emergency adult hostels. STAs provide the necessary supports to manage their situation and to move on more rapidly to housing. This would have to be agreed in a cross agency protocol with local authorities.

Homeless Action Plans

The protocol directs that actions that prevent young people experiencing homelessness should be included in the statutory Homeless Action Plans which each region must prepare on a multi-annual basis. This is a very valuable guidance to regional housing authorities, and should be retained and implemented.

Accommodation within in National Policy

In addition the policy must recognize the central importance of each young person having a home.

There is a need for clear statements that no young person should leave care unless and until they have appropriate, secure and affordable accommodation and a statement of principle that the objective is that no young person will leave care and become homeless due to the lack of suitable accommodation.