

Surveys to assess the impact of COVID-19 on children and families

Empowering People in Care (EPIC), Ireland

Introduction

EPIC – Empowering People in Care – is a national voluntary organisation that advocates for children and young people living in a range of care situations in Ireland, including residential care, foster care, relative/kinship care, hostels, and high support/special care facilities. EPIC also works with children and young adults preparing to leave care and those in aftercare. Its advocacy aims to increase children and young adults' understanding of and participation in the decisions affecting them. EPIC manages regional and national Youth Councils, which publicly campaign for change and improvements in the provision and quality of care services at a local, regional, national and international level.

The tool

In March 2020, like many other countries around the world, Ireland entered into a period of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerned about how these restrictions would impact on the 409 children and young people in residential care, as well as the staff looking after them, EPIC decided to conduct a survey with all residential care facilities in the country. The survey sought to document the challenges arising for children and staff as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, the impact on work practices, any potential need for increased or additional support and any innovative practices emerging as a result of the crisis.

Implementation

In order to contact all residential care centres, EPIC had to firstly develop a list of all residential care centres in the Republic of Ireland. There are three different types of care homes in the country: those that are state run, those that are privately owned and a small number of voluntary homes, mainly run by religious orders. While a list of the 38 state-run homes was straightforward to obtain, EPIC staff took on the task of identifying all the privately and voluntary-run residential care centres themselves, which involved contacting the 31 different private providers and 16 individual voluntary organisations involved in the care of children. Their research concluded with a list of 107 private residential centres and 29 voluntary-run homes, giving a total of 174 residential care facilities in Ireland's 26 counties. All of the centres were contacted directly by EPIC staff to explain the purpose of the survey, after which the questionnaires were emailed to centre managers for staff to complete.

In keeping with the idea of the survey being a glimpse of residential care during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the questions were kept short and focused. The five main questions related to the young people and staff in the homes. The question aimed at the young people was broken into six sub-questions but remained focused on their experiences and how they were coping with the lockdown and new restrictive guidelines. The next question asked about the difficulties that staff may have been experiencing, in order to help raise the possible issue of staffing and the change in shift patterns. The survey then looked at how work practices had to change and what new initiatives had been introduced. This question was intended to elicit and record the positive and innovative initiatives that EPIC had heard about anecdotally, and to share examples of good practices with other homes. The penultimate question asked if extra supports were needed. The reasoning behind this was two-fold. Firstly, if it were a local issue,



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EPIC could endeavour to help obtain more resources and secondly, if issues were presenting themselves across a range of homes and counties, EPIC could advocate on a national basis for a resolution. The last question was left open, inviting any other comments or suggestions.

The centres were all asked to give their consent for EPIC to collate and forward any relevant information to the government Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency, to inform them of any support or resourcing issues that emerged in relation to residential care.

Outcomes

- The survey findings were presented to the Child and Family Agency in May 2020 and used as an advocacy tool to encourage the government to act on the issues relating to residential care centres.
- A report on the survey and its findings was published in the [Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care](#).¹
- This is the first time that a mapping exercise has been carried out to identify all residential care facilities in Ireland.

Key findings of the survey

Two main issues stood out across the range of survey responses:

- **Family access**
Although centres did their best to ensure that young people had access to social media apps and other forms of technology, not all parents had access to this technology. This issue of digital poverty left families unable to see each other for long periods of time, which intensified the feelings of loss and increased stress levels for the young people involved.
- **Education**
This issue took many forms, including in relation to the lack of digital devices for children to use for school work. There was an additional demand on social care staff to teach children, without being qualified teachers or having knowledge of the curriculum, as well as in motivating young people to do their school work. Both young people and staff missed the structure and routine of the school day.

Other issues and practices shared by the survey respondents included the challenge of social distancing with young children and increased levels of anxiety among some young people, caused by the pandemic.

See this [summary presentation](#)² or read the [full report on the survey's findings](#)³ and see the survey itself [here](#)⁴.

¹ Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care, COVID-19: Survey of Residential Care Services in Ireland during the Lockdown Restrictions: https://www.celcis.org/files/3715/9540/6207/Murphy_John_COVID-19_Survey_of_residential_services_in_Ireland_during_the_lockdown_restrictions.pdf

² Presentation - Survey of Residential Care Services During the COVID-19 Restrictions: <https://a5e55440-d050-42e1-9eed-6b7742bd53b7.usfiles.com/ugd/a5e554-029446d73d6746e78193440e8ee14eda.pptx>

³ Report - A Survey of Children's Residential Care Services in Ireland during the Covid-19 crisis: <https://a5e55440-d050-42e1-9eed-6b7742bd53b7.usfiles.com/ugd/a5e554-34c7365b00054c7590dcb509a7d1f25c.pdf>

⁴ Survey of Residential Services During the Covid-19 Restrictions: <https://a5e55440-d050-42e1-9eed-6b7742bd53b7.usfiles.com/ugd/a5e554-0cd7d8f015177436c-8643f0c5f022082e.pdf>

Challenges faced

- The survey's focus on capturing a specific snapshot in time meant that it had a fairly tight deadline for responses. Because of this, and the increased workload on staff and managers during the pandemic, the survey only had a response rate of 27 per cent.
- Due to ethical and legal constraints, it was not possible to speak directly with the children and young people in the homes, which would have been the ideal scenario.
- The survey only gives a snapshot of a developing situation in a given moment in time.

Next steps

EPIC has identified three key issues from the survey for further investigation, namely:

- Education and the difficulties highlighted by the lockdown period regarding access to and quality of education for young people in residential care.
- Family access and the issue of digital poverty in restricting contact between children in care and their families.
- Staff burnout has become a concern with staff working longer shifts and going from work to home with no means of de-stressing.

EPIC also called for further research into certain aspects of residential care services in Ireland, including:

- A longitudinal study on the outcomes of those leaving residential care.
- An examination of the number of residential placements that young people have during their time in care.
- The differences between residing in a statutory placement and a privately-run home.
- The ages of young people coming into residential care.
- The significant growth of private residential care and the implications of this for children placed in alternative care.

EPIC has identified a range of issues related to the rights of children in the care system that are not being addressed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including child protection referrals; mitigating the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on mental health; managing a backlog in access visits once restrictions are lifted; and leaving care during COVID-19. It is monitoring these issues closely in order to hold the government to account.

Top tips

- 1 Try to keep survey questions short and specific.
- 2 Ensure, if possible, that any suggestions to help with young people or staff are acted upon.
- 3 Finally, ensure you get back to all who have helped in the process and if possible give them a copy of the final research paper.

CONTACT DETAILS

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