



An Roinn Leanaí  
agus Gnóthaí Óige  
Department of  
Children and Youth Affairs



**LISTEN**

**TO OUR**

**VOICES!**

HEARING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE  
LIVING IN THE CARE OF THE STATE

**SUMMARY**



## WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

- The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) set up meetings to ask young people in care what they think about living in care.
- There were 15 meetings – in Dublin, Cork, Sligo and Galway – held between January and June 2010.
- In total, 211 young people came to the meetings. They lived in different types of care settings, such as:
  - foster care;
  - residential care;
  - separated children seeking asylum (*i.e. children who are here from another country without anyone to look after them*);
  - young people who had just left care;
  - homes for young people with a disability;
  - detention schools.
- In the beginning, children and young people were invited to come to the meetings by the HSE or by their social workers. The HSE and social workers found very few children and young people to come to the meetings. So the OMCYA tried another way and asked other groups who look after young people in care to invite people they knew. The OMCYA would have liked more young people in care to have taken part, especially those in foster care (because it is where most young people in care live).

## WHAT WERE THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE TALKING ABOUT AT THE MEETINGS?

- The meetings were held to see what young people in care thought about living in care.
- The 211 young people were asked to give their opinions on questions like:
  - What are the most important things about living in care?
  - What is good about living in care or what works well?
  - What is NOT good about living in care or what does not work well?
  - What should be done to make it better?
  - How can you make sure you 'have your voice heard' or are listened to when you are living in care?

## MAIN THINGS YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE SAID WERE IMPORTANT

- Having a right to see their birth parents without being made to if they don't want to.
- Being treated as 'one of the family' in foster care
- Foster families should be checked out and have preparation and training in 'how to be a good foster family'.
- There is not enough information for young people in care, especially about 'aftercare' (what happens after you turn 18).
- There is too much moving around, which can be very upsetting.
- It is really important for young people in care to have at least one person to 'listen' or to 'be there'.
- Information about young people in care should be kept private – if you tell someone about something private, they should not tell everyone else.
- Every single thing about a young person in care does NOT need to be written down in a file every day (in residential care).
- Having good Internet access.
- Being able to have a pet.

As well as these things, two other things were talked about a lot by young people in care:

- **Social work services:** Some young people in care said that their social worker was 'really good'; they really liked when they were honest and gave 'straight answers'. Young people aged 8-12 liked their social workers, but most people over 12 did not. They did not feel that the social worker listened to them and they made promises that they did not keep. They also thought that they made their problems worse. The biggest complaint was that they never got to see their social worker, especially if they lived in Dublin. Young people in care thought that more social workers were needed.
- **Care plan reviews:** Care plan reviews are meetings to talk about and make decisions about what happens for each young person in care. Some young people in care did not know what a 'review' was because they had never been at one, even though that is where really important decisions about their life in care were made. Most young people who had been at a 'review' meeting did not like it. They said there were too many adults there, whom they had not invited, and that it was too difficult for them to say anything in front of all these adults, who then just took over the decisions. Young people also thought that 'nothing changed' after the meetings so they were 'a waste of time'.

## DETENTION SCHOOLS and ST. PATRICK'S INSTITUTION

Young people who are in Detention Schools (places where the Courts can send young people if they do things that break the law) and St. Patrick's Institution (a type of prison for young boys) are not allowed leave if they want to. They had some different things to say, e.g.

- drugs and alcohol are a big part of their lives;
- they don't have much freedom or privacy (e.g. having time alone or keeping information about themselves secret);
- the services (like the shop or gym) are not very good;
- they don't get much respect from the people who work there.

They also had some ideas to help make their voices heard:

- being treated like humans (St. Patrick's Institution) and being respected by the people who work in the school or prison;
- having a group to tell the people who work in the prison or school what young people think;
- being able to talk to a person who does not work there;
- having a visit from the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to talk about important things.

## YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Some young people with very serious disabilities were not able to come to any of the meetings being held around the country. This was because some of them cannot talk very easily. Because it is so important to know what young people with disabilities think about living in care, a woman who really knows how to talk to young people who have difficulties talking went to visit 9 young people with disabilities to meet them on their own. She found out that because it is difficult for these young people to talk, people don't ask them for their opinion on anything very often. Some of the things they said were really important for young people with disabilities living in care were:

- being able to see their family;
- being able to play sports;
- being able to play on the computer;
- having a choice about what to do with their time, e.g. play sports or play on the computer;
- being able to have friends;
- having someone to talk to;
- having more people to talk to;
- having a nice place to live in (e.g. a nice bedroom) and to play in (e.g. a nice garden);
- being independent (able to make decisions about their lives on their own);
- having some privacy (having time on their own or keeping information about themselves to themselves);
- having a safe place to live and being able to have the door open or closed, or the light on or off if they want.



## THINGS YOUNG PEOPLE SAID TO DO TO MAKE THEIR LIVES IN CARE BETTER

- Have better social work services, where social workers have fewer young people to look after. That way they can spend more time with the young people that they DO look after.
- Change 'care plan reviews' (meetings to talk about what happens for young people in care) so it is easier for young people to speak up and have more of a say in the decisions that are made about them.
- Foster families should be checked out more before they are allowed to foster young people.
- Foster families should HAVE TO do training before they become a foster family.
- Have more information for young people in care on, for example:
  - how the care system works;
  - aftercare;
  - groups that work with young people in care.

## HAVING YOUR VOICE HEARD

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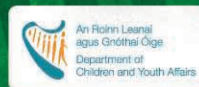
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## ???

## WHAT NOW?

It is REALLY important that the people who look after children in care LISTEN to all of these ideas from young people who are living in care and, most importantly, DO SOMETHING about it.



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