

“Be strong - there's so many problems waiting”

The Experiences of Separated Children Seeking International Protection in Ireland

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List of abbreviations

ACIMS	Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service
AIDA	Asylum Information Database
EPIC	Empowering People in Care
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
GAL	Guardian ad litem
HSE	Health Service Executive
HIQA	Health Information and Quality Authority
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Services
IPO	International Protection Office
LAITs	Local Authority Integration Teams
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PASM	Practice Assurance and Service Monitoring
SEA	Special Emergency Arrangements
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
YAP	Youth Advocate Programmes Ireland

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed a marked increase in people who have experienced conflict, persecution, and climate disasters, resulting in more people being forced to flee their homes. According to UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, the number of forcibly displaced people globally has reached record highs, with 123.2 million forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Children represent a significant proportion of those who are displaced: approximately 40% (UNHCR, 2024). Of these children, while many remain with family members, many are separated from them and seek asylum by themselves. Statistics from the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) indicate that in 2023, unaccompanied minors lodged 41,000 applications for asylum across EU+ countries (EUAA, 2024). Increasingly, those who are displaced are met with rising anti-immigrant sentiment in many parts of the world. For unaccompanied children, this context is especially precarious. The intersection of increasing displacement and growing hostility leaves them at heightened risk of exploitation, neglect, and exclusion, thus highlighting the need to understand their experiences and ensure systems are in place to meet their needs.

In Ireland, separated children seeking international protection¹ represent one of the most vulnerable yet resilient groups in our society. These are generally defined as children under the age of 18 who are outside of their country of origin and separated from their parents or legal or customary caregivers. Their journeys are shaped by loss, uncertainty, and the pressing need for safety, yet too often, their voices and the perspectives of those working with them remain unheard.

This research explores the lived experiences of separated children, particularly those in residential care, in order to better understand how well their rights are upheld and where systemic gaps remain. Professionals who work with these children also contributed to the research. As suggested by the title of this report – based on a quotation from a young person who participated – the findings suggest the need for strength, given the multiple challenges faced by the young people and by professionals working with them.

The research comes at a timely juncture. Fifteen years ago, Ireland shifted from an institutional hostel model of care towards a more equitable approach, yet increasing numbers of arrivals have

¹ While the terms ‘separated child’ and ‘unaccompanied minor’ are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes used to mean slightly different cohorts, for the purpose of this research ‘separated child’ will generally be used. This will refer to children under the age of 18 who are outside of their country of origin and separated from their parents or legal or customary caregivers. Recognising that most separated children are 16 or 17 years of age, separated young people will also be used. Where other terms are used (e.g. unaccompanied minor), this is because this is the terminology used in the literature that is cited or this is the term used by the research participant who is being quoted.

challenged this progress, leading to significant pressure on care and protection systems and resulting in the increasing use of Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs). Within this research, young people's accounts reveal disparities in access to education, healthcare, and suitable stable placements, and suggest that systemic pressures can undermine the best interests of the child. Through interviews with both young people and professionals, the research captures a nuanced picture of these children's realities. It highlights also the crucial role of relationships with professionals, the importance of being informed and also able to exercise one's rights, and the need for continuity and consistency as children transition to adulthood. By centring the perspectives of young people and the professionals working closely with them, this report seeks not only to document young people's experiences but also to inform more effective, compassionate, and rights-based policies and practices.

Structure of the report

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides an introduction to the policy context in which the research is situated. It begins by positioning separated children as "rights bearers" within international law before then discussing the legal and policy context in Ireland as regards this cohort. It examines legislation and policy in relation to the identification of a separated child and the role of Ireland's Child and Family Agency, Tusla. It then looks at legislation and policy in relation to care and accommodation arrangements, international protection, family reunification and aftercare. It outlines three phases of care provision for separated children in Ireland before discussing current and future developments and then identifying relevant data in relation to these children and young people.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the literature in relation to the circumstances of separated children, examining research regarding their pre- and post-migration challenges and associated vulnerability, as well as their resilience and agency. It looks too at care and support for separated children, exploring research in relation to key support factors, care arrangements and ageing out of care at 18 years.

Chapter 4 is the methodology chapter. It details the ethical protocols, recruitment challenges, and research methods utilised. It discusses the challenges faced in recruiting separated children under the age of 18, which ultimately resulted in only those aged 18 years or over being able to participate. It describes the demographics of the 32 participants (7 young people and 25 professionals) who took part and the qualitative approach taken via semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The chapter also discusses ethical considerations, data analysis processes, and the study's limitations.

Chapter 5 is the first of three findings chapters. Drawing on the data, it explores how separated children in Ireland access care and the international protection systems. Data from the young people who took part suggested that, upon arrival, they were assessed by Tusla for service eligibility and provided with accommodation, with many experiencing several relocations due to system pressures. While basic needs like food and hygiene were generally met, inconsistent standards across different accommodation types, particularly Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs) raised concerns. SEAs were criticised for often having under-qualified staff, weaker support systems, and poorer living conditions, including lack of privacy and limited resources. The chapter also details the complexity and emotional toll of age assessments, with professionals expressing concern about flawed procedures, lack of independent appeals, and severe consequences for young people deemed to be adults. These include being placed in largely unsupported adult settings, losing access to education and a significant negative impact on family reunification rights. Additionally, the findings suggest that the international protection process is experienced as adversarial and stressful, exacerbated by both delays and abrupt decisions. Despite these challenges, professionals strive to support young people through legal processes and daily living. Overall, the findings highlight the strain on Ireland's care systems amidst rising arrivals. They stress the need for improved accommodation standards, clearer age assessment procedures, and a more child-centred protection process.

Chapter 6 explores the support and services available to separated children in Ireland after their initial arrival. It presents mixed experiences with Tusla, highlighting both meaningful relationships with social workers and concerns about inconsistent support and staffing shortages. The findings suggest variability in access to mental health and education services with some children and young people having positive school experiences and others not having access to educational provision that met their needs, particularly where English language ability was limited. Young people faced challenges too in navigating cultural differences and racism, with reference made by young people and professionals alike to rising anti-refugee sentiment within Ireland. In relation to care provision, a key tension was around balancing autonomy with safety, particularly for the young people who had experienced high levels of independence in their home countries or during their journeys. The findings suggested too that the extent to which young people had contact with family varied, with evidence of efforts being made by professionals to facilitate contact. Such contact was not without complexity, however. The possibility of family reunification brought hope but also stress in relation to the levels of bureaucracy and the lack of support post-reunification. Finally, this chapter discusses the fact that peer support was valued, as was the role played by advocates. Overall, there was evidence that the growing demand for services due to increased numbers of separated children arriving in Ireland compromised access to quality services.

Chapter 7, the last findings chapter, explores the critical transition period for separated children in Ireland when they turn 18 and move from Tusla care into adulthood. The findings highlight significant gaps in aftercare support, particularly for those who may not have spent sufficient time in care to qualify for aftercare entitlements. Many young people face abrupt changes, including relocation to adult international protection accommodation with limited supports, often resulting in disrupted education, unstable housing, and emotional distress. Professionals expressed concern about the systemic shortcomings and noted the stark contrast in support before and after the age of 18. The chapter also addresses the impact of the housing crisis and sheds light on the vital role of committed individuals who try to fill the gaps left by the system, thus leading to more positive experiences for some young people. Additionally, it identifies a strong need for specialised training for professionals working with separated children.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, summarises the key findings and outlines policy and practice recommendations. These recommendations centre around the areas of legal status of separated children, care arrangements, social work support and independent advocacy, standards of inspection, training and qualifications, aftercare, education, and the international protection system. The chapter also recommends the need for the development of a specific policy framework in this area and the need for interagency committees for separated children and young people to ensure a consistent level of nationwide supports for this cohort. The final recommendation suggests the need to address barriers to the participation of separated children in research studies.

Chapter 2: Policy context

Introduction

In order to set the scene for the remainder of the report, this chapter sets out the legal and policy context surrounding separated children in Ireland, outlining firstly the human rights framework and then detailing legislation and policy pertaining to care provision and international protection. It then discusses three distinct phases of care provision for separated children in Ireland before outlining current and future developments. The chapter then presents data on separated children in Ireland over time before then concluding with an outline of the structure of the remainder of the report.

Separated children as rights-bearers

Drawing on the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – which the Irish government ratified in 1992 – this study recognises separated children as rights-holders, deserving of equal protection, participation, and dignity, regardless of their migration status.

The UNCRC provides a comprehensive framework for the responsibilities of state parties to all children within their jurisdiction, including children seeking international protection and refugees. A fundamental right enshrined in the UNCRC (Article 3) is that the best interests of the child is a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. Of particular relevance to separated children is Article 20 of the UNCRC, which obliges states to protect children who are without parental care and to give due regard to continuity in their upbringing and to their “ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds” when alternative care is needed. In addition, Article 22, which focuses on refugee children, requires states to ensure refugee children and those who are seeking refugee status are provided with “appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance” so that they can enjoy the rights outlined in the Convention. It also obliges states to make efforts to trace family members. In addition, it stipulates that:

“In cases where no parents or other members of the family can be found, the child shall be accorded the same protection as any other child permanently or temporarily deprived of his or her family environment for any reason, as set forth in the present Convention.”

An increasing number of unaccompanied and separated children and the identification of protection gaps for these children prompted the UN to issue a General Comment with regard to this group in 2005. The objective of General Comment Number 6 is to:

“draw attention to the particularly vulnerable situation of unaccompanied and separated children; to outline the multifaceted challenges faced by states and other actors in ensuring that such children are able to access and enjoy their rights; and, to provide guidance on the protection, care and proper treatment of unaccompanied and separated children based on the entire legal framework provided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the ‘Convention’), with particular reference to the principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child and the right of the child to express his or her views freely.”

General Comment Number 5 provides guidance in relation to a wide range of areas including initial assessments, appointment of a guardian and legal representative, care and accommodation arrangements, access to education, rights to an adequate standard of living and to enjoy a high standard of health, prevention of trafficking and exploitation, prevention of military recruitment and prevention of deprivation of liberty. It also provides guidance on access to the asylum procedure and supports within that process. In addition, it outlines guidance on family reunification, return, and other forms of durable solutions, as well as guidance on training data and statistics. Overall, it provides a comprehensive source of guidance on how states can ensure the rights of separated children are met.

In addition to the UNCRC, unaccompanied and separated children seeking international protection are also fully entitled to the rights in the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (“1951 Convention”) and its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, both of which Ireland is party to. In order for children to access their rights under the 1951 Convention and the UNCRC, children must be properly identified as children and states have an obligation to do this and to identify also whether a child is unaccompanied (UNHCR, 2024). It is to this that we now turn, with specific attention to the Irish context.

Separated children within Irish legal and policy frameworks

Law and policy in relation to the identification of separated children and their initial referral to Ireland’s Child and Family Agency

Regarding legislation and policy in relation to care provision of separated children in the Irish context, under Section 14 of the International Protection Act 2015 – the main legal statute regulating international protection for adults and for children – where an immigration official or an officer of the International Protection Office (IPO) identifies that a child under the age of 18 who is seeking to make an application for international protection is not accompanied by a parent, the state Child and

Family Agency (Tusla) is informed and from there the Child Care Act 1991 (as amended) applies. The relevant Tusla team with responsibility in this area is the Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP) team. This is a Dublin-based team, in existence for more than 25 years, composed of social workers (including principal social workers, team leaders and basic grade social workers), social care workers, family support workers and aftercare workers. This team has four different “streams” to their work, focused on (1) children protection duty and response, (2) children in care, (3) fostering and supported lodgings, and (4) aftercare (Dunning, 2025). Ireland’s Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) (2025) describes the service as having a dual mandate: firstly, providing care and protection to children who are in the care of Tusla or being accommodated by Tusla, including supporting them with integration and with their international protection application; secondly, offering care “to the point of aftercare, planning and transition to independence and onward support with family reunification” (p.5). It has a remit for both those seeking international protection and those from Ukraine in receipt of temporary protection.

The most recent inspection report of the service by HIQA found that the service was “non-compliant” on seven of the eight standards assessed (HIQA, 2025). The report notes the commitment of staff to provide a quality child-centred service, amidst an increasing referral rate (discussed further below), but points to difficulties in implementing initiatives to improve services given the pressures that staff are under, with many expressing that they feel overwhelmed. The pressure on Tusla’s service for separated children has also been acknowledged by UNHCR (UNHCR Ireland, 2024).

Age determination has long been a key issue of concern when separated children are referred to the SCSIP team. While Section 24 of the International Protection Act permits an international protection officer to arrange an examination to determine the age of an applicant (AIDA, 2024), Cosgrave (2025) highlights that “there is no legislation governing age assessment procedures in the context of receiving a child into care” (Cosgrave, 2025, p.5). Following many years of there being no approved national policy or guidance on how age assessment should be conducted (AIDA, 2024) – a fact that was the subject of criticism (e.g. Nasc, 2023) – in 2023, Tusla produced procedural guidance – *Eligibility for Services for Separated Children Seeking International Protection* (Tusla, 2023a). The guidance outlines that at the point of arrival, an “intake eligibility assessment” is undertaken by an intake team of social workers to establish if the person referred is a child in need of care and protection (Tusla, 2023a). According to the procedure, this involves a holistic approach, which decides on eligibility and identifies needs. Regarding age assessment, the document states:

“While the determination of a child’s age is not part of the intake eligibility assessment, there may be a requirement to explore if the person is in fact a child as part of the assessment where there are doubts that the person referred to the service may be an adult. This should only be explored if there are doubts in relation to the stated age of the person and/or in cases where several elements of evidence gathered contradict the claimed age.”

Law and policy in relation to care provision under the Child Care Act 1991

Once a child is deemed eligible for services, Tusla then determines what part of the Child Care Act will be applied. Corbett (2023) outlines that as the Child Care Act 1991 does not specifically refer to unaccompanied or separated children, there are no legal or policy guidelines regarding appropriate provision for admitting separated children into care or for maintaining them in care. This is also noted by UNCHR Ireland (2024). Indeed, Tusla has acknowledged the need for greater consideration within child care legislation of their role and remit in how they care for separated children (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023). In practice, at present, different sections of the Child Care Act 1991 are utilised to offer care and protection for separated children, although a breakdown of the number of separated children cared for under the different sections of the Child Care Act 1991 does not appear to be available. This is despite the fact that UNHCR Ireland (2024) notes that a decision regarding which provision of the 1991 Act to use “can have many consequences for the rights and support services available to the child concerned” (p.4).

For example, under Section 5, “suitable accommodation” is provided to a child who appears to be homeless but they are not taken into the care of the state and parental responsibility is retained by their parent/guardian. This means that unaccompanied or separated children have no legal guardian in the state, Tusla cannot provide consent on the child’s behalf, judicial oversight of care arrangements is lacking, and the statutory safeguards that apply to children in care do not necessarily apply. These “statutory safeguards” are described by Corbett (2023) as an “allocated social worker, care plan, periodic child-in-care review and access to court” (p.10). In addition, there is no right to access an independent guardian and there is no independent mechanism to hear the views of the child (Corbett, 2023). However, it is important to note that Tusla states the following: “Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 is the legal basis under which the agency broadly makes intervention with this cohort of young people [separated children]. However, the equity of care principle applies to separated children, which is designed to afford them the same standard of care provision as any other child in care.” (Tusla, 2025e, p.7.)

Under Section 4 of the Child Care Act 1991, a child can be voluntarily admitted into care but if a parent wishes to resume custody, then the child must be returned to them. The use of this section of the act has been subject to criticism for many years (e.g. Arnold and Kelly, 2012) with Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton (2017) stating that “the use of the voluntary care provision means that judicial scrutiny as regards the type, form and duration of the care placement for separated children is largely missing, with inevitable negative impact ... upon aftercare decision-making” (p.389). More recently, in an inspection report by Ireland’s statutory health and social care watchdog, the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) expressed serious concern in relation to placement of children in voluntary care under Section 4 “without the required consent being obtained or evidenced on their files” (HIQA, 2023, p.13). In particular, HIQA (2023, p.34) found that the practice of Tusla staff signing the voluntary agreement when consent could not be obtained from parents was unsafe because “this practice meant that Tusla staff members who had no legal authority were consenting to the placement of the child within their own organisation as well as for any medical treatment if required.” UNHCR Ireland (2024) deems Section 4 to be a more appropriate mechanism than Section 5 for providing care to separated children, but highlights the need to review its operation, given HIQA’s (2023) concerns. Corbett (2023) highlights that while the statutory safeguards (such as having an allocated social worker) apply to children who are in care under Section 4, there is no right to access an independent guardian. In addition, problems with consent arise. In its 2025 inspection, HIQA noted a significant reduction in the use of voluntary care, but also noted some ongoing concerns (HIQA, 2025).

As well as Section 4 and Section 5, Section 17 and 18 of the Child Care Act 2001 can also be utilised. These involve Tusla applying to the courts to admit the child into care under an interim care order (Section 17) or a care order (Section 18). Corbett (2023) outlines that under these orders “decision-making transfers to Tusla” (p.10). While Tusla does not, strictly speaking, become the legal guardian for the child (Cosgrave, 2025), Corbett’s (2023) analysis suggests several benefits to using Section 17 and 18. Among other things, under a Section 18 care order, Tusla can consent to necessary medical or mental health care and can apply for international protection on behalf of the children (Corbett, 2023). Children in care under Section 17 or 18 are entitled to be provided with a “registered care placement” (Corbett, 2023, p.11). In addition, the statutory safeguards noted above apply. Importantly, while decision-making transfers to Tusla, parental rights are not permanently severed, thus ensuring that family reunification remains a possibility. Judicial oversight is in place and the views of the child can be heard by the courts through the social worker, a guardian ad litem (GAL) or through the child directly. Overall, Corbett (2023, p.11) concluded that, while resource intensive, “the application for a Section 18 care order provides the most robust response to the care needs of

an unaccompanied or separated child”. Corbett (2023) suggests dealing with the resource intensiveness issue by engaging with the courts about the possibility of holding “consolidated hearings” (p.11). Alternatively, in the context of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill (2023) being considered by the Oireachtas (as discussed further below), UNHCR Ireland (2024) suggests that the 1991 Act should be amended to clarify the admission of separated children into Tusla’s care. The organisation suggests that consideration should be given to having new grounds for admitting unaccompanied or separated children into care, “where a child has no parent, guardian or person acting in loco parentis who is available, suitable and willing to provide care to the child” (p.3).

Law and policy in relation to aftercare

Within the Irish context, aftercare is governed by Section 45 of the Child Care Act 1991, the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 and the National Aftercare Policy for Alternative Care (Tusla, 2017). The Child Care Amendment Act 2015 places a statutory duty on Tusla to form a view in relation to each person leaving care as to whether there is a “need for assistance”, and the policy specifies that aftercare assessment and planning should begin when the child turns 16. (Tusla, 2017). Where aftercare supports are provided, they can be provided up to the age of 21, or beyond that until age 23 if the young person is in education or training. Under the 1991 Act, the entitlement to support includes being visited or assisted, the provision of support in relation to completion of education or training, and arranging accommodation.

However, despite considerable developments in recent years, the level of aftercare support, even for the general cohort of care leavers, has been criticised (EPIC and IFCA, 2022; Palmer et al., 2022). Arguably, the inadequacy of aftercare support is even greater for separated young people. Of particular note is the fact that under Tusla’s National Aftercare Policy for Alternative Care, to be eligible for aftercare supports the relevant young people must have been in care for at least 12 months prior to turning 18. Periods of time spent accommodated under Section 5 can be considered as part of the 12 months, but there needs to have been some time spent “in care” (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2024). In practice, partially in order to address this, Tusla has indicated that it uses Section 4 of the Child Care Act 1991 for 28 days following the young person’s arrival, during which time they endeavour to seek the consent of parents for voluntary care. According to Tusla, this period of care under Section 4 can then be counted towards eligibility for aftercare, even if Section 5 is used subsequently². However, often separated children will not be entitled to aftercare supports given

² This information was provided by a senior Tusla professional who was consulted regarding Chapter 2, in order to ensure accuracy, given the lack of publicly available information on many aspects of the current context.

that many arrive in Ireland at age 17 and thus do not spend a full year in care (Groarke and Arnold, 2018). Added to this, for those seeking international protection, if they have not been granted a form of protection or leave to remain before turning 18, their birthday may coincide with having to move out of foster care or residential care to the adult system for international protection applicants (Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton, 2017). Young people in such circumstances do not have the entitlement to the aftercare allowance, instead being entitled to the same financial support that adult international protection applicants receive.

Applying for international protection and family reunification

In relation to applications for international protection, children have the same rights as adults in the asylum procedure and some additional rights such as the right to have their best interests taken into account and the right to be heard by those who are making decisions on their behalf (UNHCR, n.d.). Under the International Protection Act 2015, children under the age of 18 cannot themselves apply for international protection. However, an employee of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) can make an application for international protection on behalf of a child “in respect of whom the Agency is providing care and attention”. However, it has been argued that doing so is problematic when separated children are taken into care under Section 4 or accommodated under Section 5, given these sections of the Act do not grant Tusla legal guardianship (AIDA, 2024; Cosgrave, 2025). Moreover, AIDA (2024) has argued that there is no legislative or policy guidance about how Tusla should make a decision on whether a minor should proceed with an international protection application, with this decision being at the discretion of Tusla.

Regarding family reunification, children or young people who arrived in Ireland as unaccompanied minors and who have been granted international protection may apply for family reunification for their parents and minor siblings under Sections 56 and 57 of the International Protection Act 2015 (AIDA, 2024). As such their rights are substantially greater than the rights of individuals who arrive at age 18 or older. The European Court of Justice has ruled that “minors” who turn 18 years old during the asylum procedure retain the right of family reunification if they apply within a reasonable time and in practice this principle appears to be applied in Ireland, where young people “age out” (i.e. turn 18) before a final decision regarding international protection is received (Cosgrave, 2025). Despite the greater family reunification rights of unaccompanied children compared with individuals who are aged over 18, the rights are still quite restrictive given the fact that reunification can only be applied for in respect of parents and *minor* siblings. There may be siblings who are over 18 who would not be covered by these entitlements. Indeed, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), writing in 2018, described some of the family reunification provisions of the

International Protection Act 2015 – including the removal of the right to apply for family reunification with extended family members – as “retrogressive measures” (IHREC, 2018, p.8).

Care arrangements for separated children: Past, present and future

Three phases of care provision

While small groups of refugee children entered the state without their parents through organised programmes prior to the 1990s, it appears that the state only began to encounter separated children arriving independently to seek asylum or international protection in the mid-1990s. The first recorded case of a separated child seeking asylum was in 1996, with the numbers increasing substantially between then and 2001, followed by a fall-off in numbers and then a more recent increase again. Since 1996, care for separated children in the Irish context could be portrayed as going through three distinct phases: (1) Primarily unregulated hostel care (1996–2010), (2) Equity of Care – regulated residential care and foster care (2010–2022), and (3) Mixed provision, unregulated and regulated placements (2022 – present).

In Phase 1, between 1996 and 2010, separated children were primarily cared for in unregulated hostels, which often comprised large numbers of children, males and females, living in institutional type settings, without social care staff on site. These arrangements were consistently criticised by various parties (e.g. OCO, 2006; Charles, 2009), with particular concerns expressed about the contravention of the UNCRC principle of non-discrimination, given the huge divergence between the form of care being used for separated children compared with the care provision for other children and young people in state care in Ireland, most of whom lived in foster care.

In Phase 2, between 2010 and 2022, a much more robust system of care for separated children was established, which was frequently referred to as involving “equity of care” (Horgan and Ní Raghallaigh, 2019), as it was considered on a par with the care being provided to other children and young people requiring the care of the state. This phase placed an emphasis on the development of family-based care – foster care and supported lodgings – which were used alongside residential care, with research suggesting that these types of care were well regarded by all stakeholders, including foster carers, social workers and children themselves (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013) as well as by European counterparts (de Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015). Of note is that during this phase, the number of children arriving and entering care was significantly lower than in the previous phase. It is also important to note that in Ireland, foster care (either with relatives or non-relatives) has tended to be used to a much greater extent than residential care (Gilligan, 2019).

In Phase 3 – the phase from 2022 to now – following a significant rise in the number of separated children entering the country, either as temporary protection applicants fleeing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, or as international protection applicants from other countries, the “equity of care” principle became more difficult to adhere to. As Tusla did not have a sufficient number of foster homes, supported lodgings placements or “registered” residential homes to cater for the young people in need of care, the organisation began to use unregistered Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs) operated by private providers, while also increasing its use of new registered residential services operated by private companies and voluntary providers, including registered residential centres and registered Supported Care Accommodation.

Children’s registered residential centres operated by private companies and voluntary providers are subject to formal registration by Tusla and undergo ongoing inspection and monitoring by Tusla’s Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service (ACIMS). However, they are not subject to inspection by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), which only has a remit to inspect Tusla’s statutory children’s residential centres. HIQA inspects such centres against the National Standards for Children’s Residential Centres, and these standards are also used by ACIMS. Under the current care arrangements, younger and more vulnerable children are placed in foster care and supported lodgings or in registered residential homes. Older children are likely to be placed in SEAs upon arrival (discussed below) and may subsequently be moved to registered settings.

In January 2023, Tusla’s ACIMS published a protocol with the title *Registration of Supported Care Accommodation for Young People Seeking International Protection*, with this protocol subsequently being updated in September 2025 (Tusla, 2025e). This protocol outlines care standards that can be applied to accommodation settings for separated children that differ from the National Standards for Residential Care. These arrangements were initially put in place in relation to separated children arriving from Ukraine but were then extended to separated children arriving from other countries, at a time when the existing model of care became overwhelmed due to a significant increase in referrals. Under the document, provision is made to allow for several differences between these care arrangements and standard registered residential homes. The key differences relate to units being able to cater for more than six young people; room sharing being permissible “where risk mitigation is effective” (p.8); lower staffing levels, and only 50% of staff needing to have a “social care or a related relevant qualification” (p.8). While not inspected by HIQA, these Supported Care Accommodation settings are inspected by Tusla’s own ACIMS.

SEAs are not registered and not subject to formal inspection. The use of unregistered placements has been the subject of criticism (Corbett and Coulter, 2024). While little has been written about SEAs,

the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) describes them as follows: “At best they are tailored individual care for children whose needs cannot be met within the available fostering and residential care services, at worse they are unregulated, ad hoc arrangements that do not serve the needs of the children they purport to care for, and indeed have been shown to put them actively at risk of harm” (O’Mahony and IASW Child and Family Special Interest Group, 2024, p.3). The authors outlined that these placements are usually located in rented accommodation, such as holiday homes, or in hotel rooms and that staffing is provided by private agencies. They suggest that they were never meant to be used in the long term but despite this have become a “common feature of care provision”. They go on to suggest that “questions have been repeatedly asked about regulation, oversight, qualifications and Garda vetting of staff, and, at times, the safety and welfare of the children they were set up to care for” (O’Mahony and IASW Child and Family Special Interest Group, 2024, p.4).

In October 2024, Tusla published an Interim Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs) for the Separated Children Seeking International Protection team. This document acknowledges Tusla’s inability to increase placement capacity in line with increased demand, thus resulting in the need for SEAs “to ensure an immediate place of safety for these children/young people” (Tusla, 2024, p.1). The SOP defines an SEA as referring to “emergency settings where a child/young person is accommodated in a non-statutory or non-procured placement” (Tusla, 2024, p.1) such as a hotel, B&B, or privately leased property, amongst other options. The SOP outlines the roles of the various parties involved in SEAs. Under this procedure, Tusla’s Practice Assurance and Service Monitoring (PASM) team provides oversight of SCSIP SEAs by monitoring the arrangements against the requirements of the SOP.

While there is limited data on the use of SEAs, in 2024 RTÉ reported that of the 166 children then accommodated in SEAs, 105 were separated children (Byrne, 2024). Tusla’s desire to cease the use of SEAs and “expand registered capacity” (HIQA, 2025, p.15) is identified in the most recent HIQA inspection of the separated children’s service, with that report also identifying “improved governance structures for the operation of SEAs in the service”, including a standardised operating procedure and posts with a specific remit for SEAs. A particular concern in relation to unregulated settings relates to the issue of children going missing, which may be at increased risk of occurring with higher staff-young people ratios, high staff turnover and with staff having lower levels of qualification. It was reported by Bray (2024) that, in 2023, 49 separated children had been reported missing and that as of 15 January 2024, 20 of these children had not returned or been accounted for.

Regarding missing children, in its recent inspection report of the Separated Children Seeking International Protection service, HIQA (2025) cited data indicating that in the previous 12 months, 50 children within the service were reported missing, with the increasing rate of missing children being higher than the increase in the rate of referral to the service. The inspection noted that no audits of the management of missing child in care cases were occurring and highlighted that this lack of analysis meant it was difficult to identify trends and risks that might be relevant, “such as the appropriateness of accommodation” (HIQA, 2025, p.24). The inspection highlighted the need for improvement to ensure staff were working in line with the national protocol with An Garda Síochána for children missing from care. It also noted concern about the identification of instances of child trafficking and exploitation with some staff not having received necessary training in this regard. The inspection also found evidence of mixed practice regarding management of risk in situations where trafficking concerns had been identified.

Indeed, recent research in the Irish context highlighted the risk of sexual exploitation for children and young people in residential care, with these children and those who go missing from care – particularly girls – found to be targeted for sexual exploitation by gangs (Canning et al., 2023). The same research noted that staffing challenges – in both residential settings and on social work teams – make it difficult for children to develop trusting relationships and pointed to concerns about the use of SEAs in hotel settings (Canning et al., 2024). While Canning et al. (2023) indicate that representatives from organisations working with “migrant children” were not included in their research, it is likely that separated children seeking international protection are at risk in this regard also. While social care staff employed in registered residential centres for separated children may have a good awareness of human trafficking (Cunniffe and Ayodele, 2022), this may not be the case for less-qualified staff working in SEAs.

Current and future developments

The legislative, policy and practice context surrounding international protection broadly, and separated children more specifically, is constantly changing. Of particular note are four important current and future developments.

Firstly, child care legislation is being amended with the General Scheme of the Children (Amendment) Bill having been published in April 2023. There was a broad range of submissions to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in their pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill, many of which referenced the need for amendments relating to separated children. These suggestions focused on some of the issues outlined above, including an overall call by

the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO, 2023) that unaccompanied children's "rights to protection and assistance need greater consideration within the General Scheme" (OCO, 2023, p.8). There were calls too from EPIC to provide a dedicated section within the Child Care Act 1991 focusing on unaccompanied minors, to cease the use of voluntary care for this cohort, and to ensure that that duration of time spent in care is only part of a wider consideration when determining eligibility for aftercare (EPIC, 2023). The Joint Committee itself took on board some of these suggestions, recommending in its report that specific provisions for protection of unaccompanied minors should be made, that "the status of a child as an unaccompanied minor itself should be enough to enable him or her to go into care" and that "upon leaving care, their status as care leavers should override their status as international protection applicants for the purposes of eligibility for aftercare" (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023, p.17). The second Bill was due to be published in the second quarter of 2025.

Secondly, given the increasing challenges arising from the rise in numbers of separated children seeking international protection/temporary protection, in 2023 Tusla convened a strategic engagement of relevant stakeholders from the statutory and non-statutory sectors. The purpose of this engagement, chaired and supported by the Children's Rights Alliance, was to identify challenges for this cohort of young people and to propose solutions that Tusla and the Government could consider. The engagement involved three meetings with a wide range of stakeholders as well as direct meetings between Tusla and government agencies and between the CRA and relevant independent organisations. In addition, Foróige was commissioned to undertake a consultation with separated children. A report based on the stakeholder engagement and Foróige's consultation was written but is unpublished. It was shared with stakeholders and submitted to Tusla. It documented many developments already in train and some proposals for consideration, including in relation to the introduction of a guardianship model; placements and accommodation, including for those age-disputed or who have reached 18 years of age; international protection; healthcare; youth services for vulnerable young adults; and interorganisational co-operation (Children's Rights Alliance, 2024, unpublished).

Thirdly, the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is likely to have very significant implications for the international protection regime in Ireland, including in relation to how separated children are treated under Irish law and policy. Under the Pact, domestic legislation is required by mid-2026. The General Scheme of the International Protection Bill 2025 has been published. It provides for the appointment of a representative for unaccompanied minors, "to assist, represent, and act on behalf of an unaccompanied minor" in procedures provided for in the Act. Children who arrive unaccompanied will be exempt from the new border procedure (a type of accelerated asylum procedure) proposed

by the Pact, unless they pose a security risk, and age assessments will need to be provided in implementing that Border Procedure (Sweeney, n.d.). As such the outcomes of age assessments may have even greater implications for the children/young people involved. Indeed, in oral contributions to the Joint Committee on Justice debate on EU regulations and directive on international protection, asylum and migration in April 2024, the Irish Refugee Council expressed concern about unaccompanied children being “incorrectly identified as adults and erroneously subject to the border procedure.”³ In the same discussion, UNHCR argued that the border procedure should not apply to unaccompanied children even when there are security concerns. It remains to be seen how the Pact’s implementation will ultimately impact separated children.

Fourthly, during the period in which this study took place, Tusla was working on developing a new model of care for separated children. Under the proposed new model, Tusla envisages having different provisions for children of different ages and presenting need (Tusla, 2024). The model proposes that those aged 14 and under will receive a care status under the Child Care Act 1991 and will be accommodated in a family placement, with a social worker allocated to the child and a care plan in place. Those aged 15 will again receive a care status under the Child Care Act 1991 but will be accommodated either in a registered children’s centre with approximately six children or in a family placement, and will be allocated a worker (not necessarily a social worker) and have a care plan in place. For those aged 16 or 17, the arrangements will vary depending on whether the young people have “additional vulnerability” or not: those aged 16 and 17 with additional vulnerabilities will receive the same provision as those who are aged 15. Those aged 16 and 17 without additional vulnerabilities will be accommodated under Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 in a registered children’s centre with approximately 12 children, have an allocated worker and placement plan (rather than a care plan). Sixteen-year-olds will also have an aftercare plan, whereas 17-year-olds will not. Of note too is that during the initial assessment process that takes place when young people initially arrive, those aged 16 and 17 without additional vulnerability will be placed in “large registered children’s intake centres” with a capacity of approximately 20 young people.

The document outlining the proposed model also outlines the key forms of support available to those who are “in care” and to those who are “accommodated” (under Section 5). The document indicates that those “in care” will have all standards and regulations applied to them and will also be provided with the following:

- “Advocacy at the point of intake eligibility;

³ See https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_justice/2024-04-30/3/.

- Representative to make international protection application on behalf of child and support child through the application process;
- Family tracing service to support young person in making and maintaining contact with their family;
- Family reunification advocacy service to support young person making an application for family reunification under the International Protection Act 2015 (subject to their status);
- Medical screening via the HSE and CHI.” (Tusla, 2024, p.7).

The document also outlines the supports available to those who are “accommodated”, which includes tangible and practical support (such as legal support and advocacy supports); emotional support (such as access to psychology and healthcare services); peer support; professional support (including social work-led support and support with the international protection application) and information support.

In response, the Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA) in 2024 published a submission on the draft model. In its submission, the CRA welcomed the fact that care orders will be sought for children under the age of 16 if parental consent cannot be obtained. It expressed concern about the equity of care for 16- and 17-year-olds in the proposed new model and also recommended that clarity was needed on what is considered an “additional vulnerability” and how this is assessed. UNHCR, in its response, highlighted family-based care as “the preferred type of alternative care for unaccompanied children” (UNHCR Ireland, 2024, p.13) and recommended that steps are taken by Tusla to strengthen foster care in the community, with a particular focus on recruitment among migrant and refugee communities. They recommend also the need to consider all factors relating to the child, using best interests assessment procedures (UNHCR Ireland, 2024).

Finally, in addition to these current and future developments, it is important to take the wider context into account. This includes (a) increased numbers of other international protection applicants, beyond separated children; (b) the arrival of significant numbers of temporary protection applicants from Ukraine; (c) a housing and homelessness crisis within Ireland; and (d) a widely recognised shortage of social workers and social care workers within the Irish context.

Data on separated children in Ireland over time

It is difficult to source accurate data on the number of separated children seeking international protection who have been accommodated by Tusla over time. The number of separated children being referred to state child protection and welfare services peaked in 2001 when there were 1,085 referrals reported (Quinn et al., 2014). The numbers declined considerably after that peak, up until 2012 (71 referrals), but have increased again in more recent years. Drawing on Tusla data, Groarke

and Arnold (2018) report that between 2014 and 2017, the number of separated children referred to Tusla rose from 97 to 175 and the numbers placed in care rose from 86 to 111 in the same period.

In recent times, statistics on children in care are generally made available through Tusla's "Performance Activity Reports", published monthly. The report for the end of 2021 indicated that 86 separated children were "in care" (Tusla, 2022). The report for the end of 2022 indicated that 129 separated children were "in care" with a further 66 children and young people being accommodated under Section 5 (Tusla, 2023b). The Performance Activity Report for December 2023 did not include data on separated children, perhaps reflecting the considerable pressure the service was under at that time. At the end of 2024, Tusla reported that there were 118 separated children "in care", with its Performance Activity Report noting in a footnote that a further 333 separated children were being accommodated under Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 (Tusla, 2025f). Statistics for the midpoint of 2025 – the end of June 2025 – indicated that there were 108 separated children "in care", with a further 370 accommodated under Section 5 (Tusla, 2025d).

Regarding countries of origin, Tusla indicates that 103 different countries are represented among the separated children that have been referred to its services. In 2023, 40.91% of the separated children in care or accommodated by Tusla were from Ukraine, 24.43% were from Somalia and 23.86% were from Afghanistan with the remainder from a wide range of other countries. Of the total of 478 separated children under the age of 18 being accommodated by Tusla at the end of June 2025, these comprised 319 international protection applicants from various countries (97 female, 222 male) and 159 children from Ukraine (36 female, 123 male).⁴

Regarding placement type, statistics provided to the authors by Tusla indicate that of the 319 international protection applicants, 107 were "in care" while 212 were accommodated under Section 5. Of those "in care", 56 were in private residential care, 13 were in SEAs, 13 were in voluntary residential care and eight were in statutory residential care. A further 17 were in either foster care or supported lodgings. Of those being accommodated under Section 5, 135 were in private residential care, 62 were in SEAs, and five were in voluntary residential. A further ten were in foster care or supported lodgings. These figures show a significant reliance on residential settings, rather than family placements, for the care of separated children, despite foster care being by far the primary placement type for the wider population of children in care in Ireland (Gilligan, 2019), with

⁴ The data in this paragraph was provided to the authors by Tusla.

87 per cent of the total number of children in care being in foster care, either general or relative foster care (Tusla, 2025c).

Of the 159 beneficiaries of temporary protection (from Ukraine), 13 were “in care” and 146 were accommodated under Section 5. Of the 13 in care, nine were in private residential care and four were in foster care or supported lodgings. Of the 146 being accommodated under Section 5, 130 were in private residential care, ten were in SEAs, five were in voluntary residential care and one was in foster care. The statistics also indicate that at the end of June 2025, a total of 282 separated young people over the age of 18 were in receipt of aftercare services and supports of various types.

It is important to note that the figures for numbers in care or accommodated by Tusla do not correspond with the total number of referrals as some young people are reunited with family who are already in Ireland and others are not deemed eligible for services (often due to an assessment resulting in a decision that they are not under the age of 18). In the first six months of 2025, the team for Separated Children Seeking International Protection received 325 referrals, compared with 286 for the same period in 2024. Eighty-six per cent of those were accommodated or received into care; the corresponding percentage for the same period in 2024 was 92 per cent.⁵ Of note too is the fact that staffing levels on this team have increased significantly in recent years.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed overview of the policy context as regards separated children in Ireland, outlining historical, current and future developments, as well as data on separated children. In doing so, it has highlighted that provision for separated children in Ireland lies at the intersection of policy in relation to international protection and policy in relation to child care and protection, both of which are in flux at present, during a time of increased numbers of separated children arriving. The chapter draws attention to the complexity of the national landscape in which this study took place.

⁵ The data in this paragraph was provided to the authors by Tusla.

Chapter 3: Overview of relevant literature

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of relevant research literature in relation to separated children seeking international protection. It explores the research in relation to the multiple challenging experiences by this group, challenges related to their pre- and post-migration lives. Alongside these challenges, the literature also highlights the resilience and agency demonstrated by many separated children. The chapter also discusses research in relation to care and support for separated children, examining in particular literature in relation to social support and care arrangements. It looks too at research in relation to the transition to adulthood. This overview of literature sets the scene for the findings chapters to follow.

The pre- and post-migration experiences of separated children

Refugee children face significant challenges that relate to their pre-migration, migration and post-migration circumstances, challenges that impact mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. For separated children, these challenges are further compounded by virtue of the fact that they are separated from parents and other family members, who would normally act as protective figures (Corona Maioli et al., 2021). Based on a systematic review of research, Daniel-Calveras et al. (2022) found a high prevalence of mental health disorders among unaccompanied refugee minors. Research by Jensen et al. (2020) in Norway showed that a considerable number of unaccompanied minors continued to experience clinical levels of mental health problems five years after arrival.

Pre-migration factors impacting separated children may include issues which triggered the flight, including lack of access to children's rights, limited educational and other opportunities, violence, armed conflict, persecution, discrimination, and the killing of family members (Nardone and Correa-Velez, 2016; Sanchez-Clemente et al., 2023). Stressful or traumatic events during migration could include witnessing or experiencing physical violence, detention or imprisonment, lack of food and shelter, witnessing other refugees drowning, and separation from travel companions (Rodriguez and Dobler, 2021; Garcia and Birman, 2022; Pfeiffer et al., 2022; Johansen and Tørrisplass, 2024). The risk of being trafficked and subject to exploitation en route is also well recognised (Sanchez-Clemente et al., 2023; Lelliott, 2017).

While stressful circumstances prior to leaving one's country and during flight can have a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing, the stress associated with the post-migration phase can sometimes be overlooked, despite its considerable impact. Indeed, research by Hornfeck et al. (2025) points to "the ongoing impact of past traumatic experiences on the one hand and the constant effect of current post-migration stressors on [unaccompanied young refugees'] mental health on the other hand" (p.1059). Similarly, Jensen et al. (2020) found that earlier experiences are exacerbated by stress at the post-migration stage. This phase is discussed in more detail here, given the focus of our study.

During the post-migration phase, most separated children go through the asylum process, with this causing stress and anxiety (Oldroyd et al., 2022). In the Irish context, based on consultations with separated children that took place in 2009, the Ombudsman for Children's Office found that children perceived the Irish asylum process as not child-friendly and insensitive to their needs and they considered official correspondence about their status as "scary and unfriendly" (Charles, 2009, p.31). Separated children contend with much uncertainty during this period also (Crafter et al., 2021). The challenge of adapting to the new culture while maintaining one's heritage culture can also be a source of stress, with evidence suggesting that acculturation stress or "acculturation hassles" may negatively impact the mental health of separated children (Keles et al., 2016). In addition, being separated from trusted caregivers or other refugees with whom they travelled may cause loneliness among separated children and the challenge of redeveloping social networks may seem overwhelming, particularly when trying to navigate a myriad of other challenges, including language learning (Omland and Andenas, 2020; Rodriguez and Dobler, 2021; Trenson et al., 2023). Separated children can also encounter multiple challenges in their education (Aleghfeli and Hunt, 2022). Added to this, separated children and young people face an increasingly unsympathetic and antagonistic environment in host countries, with a rise in anti-refugee sentiment, including protests against accommodation for asylum seekers in Ireland (Fanning, 2024). Frequently, young people's ages are subject to suspicion and scrutiny (McLaughlin, 2018). Indeed, it has been argued that access to recognition and support has become more conditional (Sirriyeh, 2024).

While dealing with this multitude of adversity, separated children often continue to maintain contact with family members and friends who are continuing to live in their home countries or who have been displaced to other countries (Gimeno-Monterde and Mendoza-Pérez, 2022; Johansen and Studsrød, 2019). Evidence suggests that family members play a very important role in their lives, despite not being physically present (Heimli et al., 2024) but that relationships are complex due to a myriad of factors (Seidal et al., 2022). While separated children may sometimes receive help and support from family members (Johansen and Studsrød, 2019), they are often also worried about

loved ones left behind (Seidel et al., 2022). In addition, separated children may feel a sense of obligation to look after their family members. In their recent research in the UK, Leon and Rosen (2023) discuss the “indebted relations” of unaccompanied child migrants, which they describe as including “anything from financial debts to emotional and moral obligations” (p.1057). While such relations can raise concerns about exploitation, Leon and Rosen (2023) draw attention to how unaccompanied children have a complex and ambivalent relationship with such indebtedness. They argue that debt repayment can be positive for the young people – giving them a sense of pride, for example – but it can also have a more negative impact – being “tiring, burdensome and extractive” (Leon and Rosen, 2023, p.22).

Regarding family reunification, research evidence points to the desire of many separated children to be reunited with family members (Seidel et al., 2022). However, many young people are faced with dealing with the reality of not being entitled to family reunification (Johansen and Tørrisplass, 2024), or only having the right to be reunited with some family members (Smith et al., 2020). The limited available research on family reunification, both in Ireland and internationally, suggests that navigating family reunification processes can be very challenging for separated young people. When family reunification occurs, the young people themselves provide considerable help to their families in the context of often very limited state support (Smith et al., 2025; Johansen and Tørrisplass, 2024).

While separated children are often framed within policy and public discourse as inherently vulnerable – not surprisingly given the many stressors they face, as discussed above – literature increasingly acknowledges their capacity for strength, adaptability, and self-determination in the face of adversity (Smyth et al., 2015; Sleijpen et al., 2016; Horgan and Ní Raghallaigh, 2019; Van Holen et al., 2020). It is important to note too that while “extraordinary” circumstances may have resulted in their departure from home, more “ordinary” circumstances are likely to have co-existed with or pre-existed the “extraordinary” (Kohli, 2006; Robinson and Segrott, 2002). During their pre-migration lives, many may have had secure family relationships, friendships, good educational opportunities and particular interests and ambitions, like any children and young people. In the post-migration context, research suggests the capacity of many separated children to cope and indeed do well despite the challenges they encounter (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010), with many considering themselves to be independent and able to manage their often-difficult circumstances (Smyth et al., 2015). Amongst other aspects, the research points to the capacity of separated children to succeed in education (Evans et al., 2018) and to establish networks of support and friendships (Eriksson et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2018; Hoare, 2022a). In addition, the literature highlights the vital role separated children play in supporting their families, as discussed above (Smith et al., 2025; Johansen and Tørrisplass, 2024).

Overall, many separated children demonstrate significant autonomy in managing their circumstances both during migration and upon arrival in the host country. Their agency suggests that in planning for the care of separated children, it is important to give appropriate consideration to their resilience, rather than having an exclusive focus on vulnerability (Horgan and Ní Raghallaigh, 2019).

Care and support for separated children

Social support

In the context of the multiple challenges they encounter, it is not surprising that research literature explores the key support factors that are relevant to unaccompanied children, with a particular focus on relationships and social support. Social support, connectedness and meaningful social relationships or lack thereof emerge as key themes in a study by Thommessen et al. (2017) in the UK. They found that participants emphasised a desire to hope for a better future, to enjoy life, laugh and to distract themselves from sadness, loneliness and longing for their families. This mirrors research in the Irish context (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010), which also identified adopting a positive outlook and suppressing emotions and distraction as two of several coping strategies. Social support is important within these coping strategies. Overall, the research evidence suggests that social support in the post-migration context is a protective factor (Trenson et al., 2023 and can have a positive impact on the psychological functioning of refugee children (Fazel et al., 2012).

Maintaining bonds with family and culture are seen as important factors which may assist in building resilience (Rodriguez and Dobler, 2021). Regarding relationships with family members, a review of literature by Seidel et al. (2022) found that families play a significant role in the lives of separated children, despite not being in close proximity to them. However, they point to the fact that while family members can serve as a resource, they can also be a source of stress and worry, as discussed above. Religious faith can also serve as a source of support (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011).

Relationships with peers of a similar ethnic and migration background have been found to be helpful in facilitating cultural continuity and a sense of being understood (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010; Oppedal and Idsoe, 2015; Behrendt et al., 2022). In a study with unaccompanied refugee minors in care centres in Norway, Omland and Andenas (2020) found that young people acted as a resource for each other by creating a sense of continuity and belonging in the host country, with the authors pointing to the particular importance of this sense of continuity given the past experiences of the young people and their multiple transitions. In Ireland, Hoare's (2022b) exploration of the protective role of friendships found friends to be akin to "proxy family" given they took on roles more usually

associated with family members. Friendships with peers from the host environment are also likely to be important, particularly in terms of facilitating adjustment to the new environment and providing recognition (Behrendt et al., 2022), but there can be challenges in establishing these friendships as was found by Mels et al. (2008) in the Belgian context.

Professionals, including staff in accommodation settings, social workers and teachers can be important sources of support too, though again these relationships are not without complexity (Mels et al., 2008; Eriksson et al., 2019; Larkin and Lefevre, 2020). Charles (2009) pointed to the importance of the support separated children in Ireland received from teachers who were supportive and encouraging. Significantly, research has found that school attendance promotes integration, an opportunity to learn the local language, to feel more included in the host society, and to make plans for the future (Trenson et al., 2023). In a study in the UK, Larkin and Lefevre (2020) highlighted the importance for unaccompanied young females of having continuity in their relationships with social workers, with the girls and young women who participated describing a “sense of not being known if their social worker was physically or emotionally absent” (p.1583).

Care arrangements

Regarding care arrangements for separated children, temporary care within a child’s extended family is usually considered the ideal first option but where this is not an option, foster care is often considered to be better than other environments such as residential care, although the evidence for this is very limited. Nonetheless, some research highlights benefits of foster care vis-à-vis other forms of care. Evidence from a study by Kalverboer et al. (2017) in the Netherlands found that compared with those who were placed in less supportive environments, separated children in foster care fared best. Research highlights the supportive environments often available in foster care and the importance of the quality of relationships in determining placement success (Rip et al., 2020). Often, foster care provides opportunities to build close relationships – sometimes amounting to “relationships of family-like intimacy developing” (Sirriyeh, 2013, p.15), with relationships lasting beyond the end of the placement. Research in Norway has highlighted the agency that separated children demonstrate in “(re)creating a sense of home” within foster care, drawing on their past experiences, their current circumstances and their future aspirations (Jarlby et al., 2025). Fostering may also be better placed to meet the child’s cultural, religious and language needs, especially if it is possible to place children with families of similar ethnic or religious backgrounds, although it is important to caution against simplistic matching and to ensure that other needs do not become overshadowed by a sole focus on culture or ethnicity (Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh, 2015). Similarly, Trenson et al.’s (2023) research in the Belgian context suggested that cultural sensitivity within

placements and affectionate bonds between carers and children would be prioritised over cultural matching. In addition, the benefits of foster care may stretch beyond childhood for separated children. For example, based on research in the UK and Ireland, Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh (2018) argue that foster care can provide the conditions necessary for emotional, social and legal recognition in human relationships, thereby facilitating transition to adulthood. Despite the evidence of positive outcomes in foster care, it is important to note that some studies question whether it is the family environment that positively influences mental health outcomes or whether those with better mental health are more likely to be placed in a family context in the first place (Van Holen et al., 2020; O'Higgins and O'Shea, 2018).

Although fostering may be preferential in many cases, it is recognised that it is unlikely to meet the needs of all separated young people. In addition, foster care can often be difficult for child welfare agencies to secure, due to a myriad of factors, including a significant increase in arrivals, as has recently been the case in Ireland. Scaling up of foster care is likely to be more difficult than scaling up of residential care. While it is important to note that the nature of residential settings can vary quite significantly both within and between countries – in terms of staffing numbers, the professional background of staff, number of children accommodated, physical surroundings, climate of the settings, whether it is a specialised facility for separated children or not – the research evidence points to important considerations, including benefits of residential settings. For some older teenagers, settling into a family environment may be challenging, particularly if they have had a degree of autonomy prior to arrival in the host country (Ní Raghallaigh, Valtolina and Pavesi, 2022). The importance of peer support within residential settings has been highlighted in several studies, with particular attention paid to the importance of other peers who are themselves separated children (Omland and Andenas, 2020). In addition, in residential care, separated children may benefit from being cared for by experienced professionals with relevant training and expertise and with knowledge of the relevant systems and processes (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013). A study in Germany suggested the importance of staffing ratios, workloads and the group climate in residential settings for separated children (Dietlinger et al., 2025). Nonetheless, residential or group type settings may also pose issues and challenges, especially if they are not subject to inspection or oversight as was the case in Ireland in the past (Charles, 2009). Given the involvement of multiple staff members in the caring role within residential settings, problems may also arise if the young people have issues with trust, as is often the case (Eide et al., 2021; Ní Raghallaigh, 2014). Overall, given the varied experiences of different care arrangements, the literature suggests that there is a need to have diverse types of care arrangements available, in order to more easily allow for individualised care planning.

Transitions to adulthood

It is well recognised within the international literature that the transition to adulthood can be a difficult one for many who are in the care system (Gupta, 2019). For the majority of young people, turning 18 is a cause for celebration. However, mirroring international studies, research evidence in the Irish context suggests that for those leaving care, it can be a time of worry and anxiety, marked by uncertainty and loss of support networks, with the stress involved having the potential to negatively impact relationships and decision-making (Palmer et al., 2022). It has been recognised that care leavers are faced with adjusting to adulthood more quickly than many of their peers, with this being referred to as “accelerated adulthood” (Palmer et al. 2022, p.749). In the case of Ireland, the risk of housing precarity and homelessness upon leaving care is considerable (Glynn and Mayock, 2023; Palmer et al., 2022) and worry about housing can impact other aspects of life for care leavers also, such as education and training (Glynn and Mayock, 2023). Increasingly, states are recognising the need to support young people beyond the age of 18, following the transition out of the care system.

For separated children, the challenges and risks may be even greater. It is recognised that separated children can become increasingly vulnerable on reaching adulthood, with negative implications for their mental health (Norton et al., 2023). Indeed, Gimeno-Monterde et al. (2021) state that “minors who migrate on their own accumulate disadvantages in the transition to adult life” (p.2). It is likely to be the case that separated children have fewer social supports than other cohorts of children exiting the care system, given that they generally have no immediate or extended family members in the country in which they are living and may have limited other supports, as many will have only been in the country for a relatively short period of time. In the Irish context, research by Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton (2017) points to the fact that reaching the age of 18 may involve moving from a caring environment, such as residential care or foster care, to an institutional setting for adult international protection applicants, where accommodation is provided but where the remit is not one of “care” (Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton, 2017). This practice is described by Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton (2017, p.386) as “problematic”, with the authors highlighting that – at the time of their study – it often involved vulnerable young people moving to isolated direct provision centres with limited access to social outlets and state services.

While in some instances, relationships with carers may endure following the transition to adulthood – for example, when foster carers remain in touch with young people and continue to support them (Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh, 2018) – this often may not occur. Depending on the jurisdiction, turning 18 could also signal the start of being treated differently within asylum processes, and it may become

more difficult to secure residency as an adult (Norton et al., 2023). It is important too to note that aftercare arrangements have an impact on young people during their time in care, as they (and their carers) worry about the transition. One participant in the study by Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton spoke of children being “scared to death of turning 18” (Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton, 2017, p.398), with this fear starting at age 16. Overall then, the literature points to the multiple challenges separated young people experience when they reach adulthood, with research findings highlighting the need to ensure better preparation for turning 18 and a supported transition into their adult years (Norton et al., 2023; Quiroga et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The literature discussed in this chapter highlights the multiple challenges facing separated children and the many adversities that they experience prior to migration, as they migrate and during the post-migration period. The research shows the complexity of their lives and the considerable risks of poor mental health and psychosocial outcomes, given their experiences. However, it points also to the resilience of many separated children, to their agency as young people, and to the importance of support structures that bolster that resilience and increase the chances of favourable outcomes.

Chapter 4: Methodology and participants

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to explore the experiences of separated children in Ireland. It also discusses ethical considerations, particularly in relation to consent and confidentiality. Data collection and the demographics of the participants are discussed, as is data analysis. The chapter also notes the limitations of the study.

Choice of research methods

The study adopted a qualitative approach, grounded in the belief that the voices and lived realities of separated children and professionals are best understood through in-depth, personal engagement. Qualitative methods were chosen to capture the richness and complexity of individual experiences, providing space for participants to share their stories in their own words. The primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and focus groups, with the former being used with both separated young people and professionals and the latter being used with professionals only. Both methods facilitated open-ended discussion and allowed for the analysis to identify themes that were not predetermined by the researcher. Interviews offered a confidential and flexible space for young people to express personal and, at times, sensitive reflections on their experiences. Likewise, interviews with professionals allowed for in-depth discussions. Focus groups complemented these insights by encouraging interaction among professionals, enabling shared experiences and collective narratives to be uncovered and diverse opinions to be shared.

Ethical considerations

The research team committed to upholding the highest ethical standards. We were informed, in particular, by Albtran et al.'s (2022) paper, *Research involving people of a refugee background: Considerations for ethical engagement*, with ethical considerations being to the fore at all stages of the research: before data collection, during data collection and after data collection. We made every effort to prioritise the wellbeing, dignity, and rights of all participants throughout the process, being particularly cognisant of the power imbalances between ourselves as researchers and the separated young people who participated.

Regarding consent, we ensured that informed consent was obtained before the involvement of participants in the interviews. Concerted efforts were made to ensure that participants were fully

informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Consent was viewed as an ongoing process rather than a once-off event and so in addition to signed consent forms, we asked participants at the start of every interview to restate their consent and, in line with the considerations outlined by Albtran et al. (2022), we stayed attuned to signs that a person may wish to end the interview early. Confidentiality and privacy were strictly maintained, with all data anonymised or pseudonymised where applicable. We were particularly cognisant of preserving confidentiality and anonymity as regards the young people, given the relatively small population of separated children in Ireland, and given the potentially sensitive nature of their circumstances and those of their families. In order to ensure anonymity, separated young people's own names were not used, as is standard within research of this nature. However, as an additional protection, pseudonyms were also not used, as doing so can result in participants becoming identifiable. While this presents a limitation as it means that the narrative of each individual cannot be followed through the report, it was deemed to be an important safeguard.

Negotiating access via formal or informal gatekeepers is not without difficulty and we found this to be true. The research team continually negotiated and re-negotiated access to separated children under the age of 18 but, unfortunately, due to a combination of reasons related to ethics, consent and data protection, it did not prove possible to include them in the study. We were advised that under the Health Service Executive's National Consent Policy (HSE, 2024), researchers are required to gain the consent of parents to interview anyone under the age of 18, regardless of the care arrangements, and that social workers cannot give this consent. Given the likely circumstances in which many of the parents of separated children may be living, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to secure meaningful informed consent. While several avenues were explored to try to resolve this issue – including consent from parents being sought by social workers or consent being sought by the researchers – ultimately, it did not prove possible to do so. A decision was therefore made to only recruit separated young people who were already 18 years of age or older. Again, this represents a limitation of the current study.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, on 20 March 2024 following a rigorous process. On foot of having already secured ethical approval from Tusla, the research was then subject to a "low risk ethical review" in UCD and this was obtained on 30 May 2024. UCD's data protection processes were also followed. The research team convened an advisory board to discuss and scope out the plans for the project and also consulted with two separated young people before data collection commenced.

Recruitment of participants, data collection and data analysis

It is recognised that separated children are a “typically hard-to-reach population” (Stapleton and Mayock, 2023, p.674), thus recruiting via people known to the children can be beneficial. While initially we had envisaged recruiting children and young people via both EPIC gatekeepers and Tusla gatekeepers, ultimately only EPIC gatekeepers were used due to data sharing challenges in recruiting via Tusla. EPIC advocates approached young people and explained the research to them and if they were interested in taking part, the research team then contacted them to provide more detail and to further engage in the informed consent process. Professionals were recruited via social media advertising and the professional networks of the researchers and of EPIC.

While initially we had envisaged using participatory focus groups with separated children, using creative methodologies, the preferences of the young people, their availability and their locations meant that ultimately we used semi-structured, in-person interviews with all seven young people. In relation to practitioners and service providers, a combination of virtual and in-person individual and group interviews were used. While the majority of interviews with professionals were individual, there were three group interviews: one with non-governmental organisation (NGO) professionals, one with residential care workers and one with Tusla professionals. All interviews were recorded and then subsequently transcribed.

In terms of sequencing, in order to forefront the perspectives of separated children, young people were firstly interviewed in summer 2024. Following this, preliminary analysis of the data from their interviews was undertaken, before then recruiting professionals. Interviews and focus groups with non-Tusla professionals, including staff in residential settings and in NGOs, took place between November and March 2025, with this extended time period enabling good levels of participation through repeated recruitment advertisements. Data analysis (discussed further below) was ongoing during this period. Data were analysed thematically using NVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis software that helps researchers organise, code, and analyse large volumes of textual, audio, and visual data (Moncada, 2025) to systematically code data by assigning labels to specific themes, allowing for the identification of patterns, relationships, and narratives.

On foot of this data analysis, preliminary findings were then generated in the form of a two-page document. This document was then brought to the focus group with Tusla professionals. The rationale for this was that they were the key professionals working with separated children and making many of the key decisions as regards their care and support. Within the Tusla focus group, the discussion broadly centred on the preliminary findings, supplemented by a semi-structured interview schedule. Two individual interviews with Tusla staff also took place, involving two social

workers who were unable to attend the focus group. Following the data collection with Tusla, further data analysis was undertaken and the final research report was drafted. Due to the constantly evolving policy and practice context, a senior Tusla professional was consulted regarding Chapter 2, in order to ensure accuracy, given the lack of publicly available information on many aspects of the current context.

Participant demographics

It was important to capture demographic details to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' backgrounds to understand their experiences within a broader social and organisational context. The study included 32 participants: seven young people who were formerly separated children and 25 professionals experienced in supporting this group. The young participants, all of whom had sought international protection alone as children, provided first-hand insights into their experiences. Participants varied in age, gender, and backgrounds, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by unaccompanied minors. This mix of lived experience and professional knowledge helped explore key issues related to young people seeking international protection and the support systems in place in Ireland within a children's rights framework.

The seven young people who participated were four male and three female and they were from Afghanistan, Somalia and Ukraine. Four young people self-identified as belonging to the Islamic faith. All but one had arrived in Ireland in 2022, with the other young person having arrived in 2020. The professionals included social workers, social care workers/others working in residential centres, and employees of NGOs with legal, policy and youth work backgrounds, offering a diverse range of expertise. Some had extensive experience of working with separated children, whereas others were very new to this area of work, only working in it for several months. The ages of the professionals ranged from 26 to 54. In terms of ethnicity, five of the 25 were of ethnicities other than white Irish. There were 18 females and seven males among the professionals who participated.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This section outlines key strengths and limitations of the study. While offering valuable insights into the experiences of separated children in Ireland, the research is constrained by several factors. These include a non-representative sample, a time gap between interviews with young people and professionals, and the rapidly evolving social and policy context. Recognising these limitations is essential for understanding the boundaries of the study and identifying areas for further, more comprehensive research.

Not a representative sample

Given that this is a qualitative study, participant numbers are not necessarily a cause for concern. However, one limitation of the study is the lack of a representative sample, which has implications for the generalisability of the findings, making it difficult to apply conclusions to the entire population of separated children in Ireland or to the entire population of professionals working with them. The experiences of separated children can vary widely depending on factors such as their country of origin, age, gender, length of stay in Ireland, and personal circumstances before arrival. As the study includes a small number of separated young people who were recruited via EPIC, their perspectives may not reflect the broader experiences of all separated children and young people in Ireland. Young people were recruited through a specific service potentially skewing the data towards individuals who are more engaged with this particular service. Regarding professionals, they were recruited via EPIC, via social media and via professional networks, as outlined above. Again, while a diverse group of professionals took part, which is a strength of the study as it added depth to the findings, those who participated may not be representative of the wider pool of professionals working with this cohort. Some important stakeholders were not included – for example, mental health professionals and teachers. In addition, foster carers were not invited to take part, as the overall focus was on children in residential settings, given its predominance in current care provision for this cohort. Overall, despite the lack of a representative sample, the interviews provided very rich data that points to important learning for policymakers and practitioners alike.

Time lag between interviews with young people and with professionals

There was a time lag between interviews conducted with the young people themselves (conducted in summer 2024) and interviews conducted with professionals (conducted between November 2024 and April 2025). While the time lag resulted in some challenges in the analysis of the data (particularly given the rapidly changing context, as described below), it also meant that there was time to analyse the young people's data before interviewing professionals. This added depth to the professional interviews.

Rapidly changing context

The political, social, and legal context surrounding separated children in Ireland and surrounding international protection more broadly is constantly evolving, which poses challenges for research in this area, including this study. Policies related to child safeguarding and protection, care provision, and international protection can change within a short period, impacting the experiences and

outcomes of separated children. For example, shifts in government policies, changes in EU asylum regulations, or increased arrivals due to global conflicts can alter the support systems available to this cohort. This poses challenges for data analysis and for ensuring recommendations arising from the study maintain relevance. Engagement with Tusla and other relevant stakeholders, including advisory board members, regarding the policy chapter and regarding the recommendations helped to ensure the rapidly changing context was accurately reflected in the report.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the methodological framework adopted to explore the circumstances of separated children in Ireland. A qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, allowed for rich, detailed insights into both personal and professional experiences.

Upholding the highest ethical standards was central throughout the research process, with particular attention to the potential vulnerabilities of the young participants. While challenges, particularly in accessing participants under 18, shaped the study's design, recruitment through trusted gatekeepers resulted in rich interviews with young adults. These interviews provided valuable, first-hand accounts of navigating life in Ireland as separated children as well as reflections on ageing out of the care system. In addition, the inclusion of professionals with significant levels of experience working with separated children as well as professionals who were very new to this area resulted in diverse perspectives within the data. Despite a few limitations, the study offers important insights into the lives and care experiences of separated children in Ireland, as we will now see in the findings chapters.

Chapter 5: Findings 1: Accessing the care and international protection systems

Introduction

Drawing on the findings from the interviews with young people and professionals, this chapter discusses access to the care and international protection systems. The chapter includes a discussion of Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs), given their prominence in the current care and accommodation arrangements for separated children and young people. In addition, age assessment is discussed, with the complexities involved highlighted. Access to and experiences of the international protection process are also discussed.

Accommodation/care upon arrival

When separated young people under the age of 18 arrive in Ireland and present to immigration officials or the International Protection Office, they are then referred to Tusla's team for Separated Children Seeking International Protection, which conducts an eligibility for services assessment. The young people who participated in the study were all aged 18 or over and had been living in Ireland for approximately two years at the time of interview in summer 2024. Six had arrived in 2022, one before the Russian invasion of Ukraine commenced and the others afterwards. One young person had arrived in 2020. Several of the young people spoke about having a number of placement moves in the initial weeks, most likely due to the sudden increase in the numbers arriving at that time and the corresponding pressure on the capacity of the care system. For example, one young person stated:

"I think I stayed, actually, I got back to [name of accommodation] for a bit, then I went to one hotel, and then like, another hotel, because, like, they didn't know where to put us, there were like, too many, too many children, but it was fine, more or less ... we were moved from time to time, but, like, I remember one hotel I was staying at, there were some like, families, Ukrainian families who were staying there, but we didn't stay there for, like, too long ... yeah, and then around, like ... two weeks after I arrived, I got, uh, finally to a house on [name of street]."

Another young person also spoke about several moves in the early days but he wasn't dissatisfied about this. When the interviewer asked what this was like for him, he stated:

“I was organised. I was happy. I was happy that I was here. Maybe some guys had an issue that, you know, moving around so quick, but I was absolutely fine. At the time I was organised and happy that I was here.”

He acknowledged the challenges facing social workers at the time:

“Because at the time, I don’t know what about now, but at the time, 2022, there was a high ... inflow of refugees? And the young adult as well, so I believe they could not ... It was tough ... for the social workers to be allocating everybody. Yeah. Yeah, sorting them out.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by Tusla staff who expressed concern about the challenges they faced with the increased numbers of young people arriving. One social worker who was on the duty team meeting young people at the point of arrival stated:

“But, like we had 20 referrals in one week. Like, there’s no way that on a team of five social workers, four that week, because people were out, you can give 20 kids what they need when they first arrive into a country. So I think it is, it’s the volume and maybe the staff levels as well.”

Frequent moves were not the case for all of the young people, however. For one young person, a foster placement was found quickly and he remained there while completing his studies:

“I stayed one day, one night in [name of place] near Dublin, while the ... I think Tusla, was seeking for the foster care for me. And by the end of the day, they found ... and I went and spent another night in the foster care ... I’m staying there until my graduation.”

Beyond accommodation, in the main young people expressed contentment as regards the meeting of their basic needs, such as food and other essentials. One young person was happy with the allowance he was receiving for non-essential items:

“Yeah, you could buy some snacks ... the toothpaste and shower gel and everything you need for the bathroom is provided by staff and everything essential is provided by staff ... you can spend them for something you want ... which is not essential.”

Similarly, there were acknowledgements of needs being met as regards food. One young person who voiced concerns about the way she was treated by staff in one setting, acknowledged that she didn’t have problems regarding access to food:

“I wouldn’t say I had any problems like finding for like the food or whatever like, yeah it was fine.”

In contrast, the experiences of some of the young people suggested that they had to advocate for themselves to have basic needs met. One young person compared centres in which she had lived. She described one setting as “worse” than a previous one and that she “hated it”. She disliked her small room, the fact that the centre did not have the food she liked, and described the setting as “dirty and chaotic”:

“My room was tiny, and it was more dirty and chaotic, like, I didn’t like that. And, again, I couldn’t, like, leave for the first few days by myself ... They had to, like, I had to leave, like, with a staff member, to show me around, whatever.”

The same young person also outlined that within this house, she had to “constantly remind” staff to order food that she liked (fresh fruit), thus suggesting that she needed to advocate for herself in order for her rights to be upheld. She said too that “the house was so messy all the time because [the other children] never cleaned up after themselves”. She indicated also that there was a chores system in place and if chores were not completed, they lost some of the money that they received.

Regarding the period in which young people were received into various accommodation/care arrangements, a lack of information in relation to the young people’s background was raised by several of the residential care staff. One residential care worker described it as “the biggest challenge” in working with this group compared with other groups with whom she had worked:

“I think the biggest challenge is the fact that the young people come in with very little background; you know, because, like as a manager, you are risk assessing safety always. And you’re also like placing young people together so like when you’re looking at a safeguarding perspective, you don’t know the trauma that these young people have experienced, or even you know, their circumstances, and why they actually really did leave their country. So we don’t know what triggers them, and we don’t know how other young people might trigger them ... Tusla has more information but they are very slow to share it.”

The same professional felt that the issue was a communication one, where no clear protocols were in place in relation to what information should be shared. She stated that “by being persistent and annoying them”, she eventually gets the information, rather than it being shared automatically. Similarly, another residential care worker also raised the need for more information during the admissions process:

“So like, I suppose, the admission process from the start from when they come in, like that needs to improve big time. And we need to get more. Obviously, they don’t have all the information. We’re not going to have it, obviously, if they don’t. But I think a better

assessment needs to be done. A better background check ... everything needs to be better and obviously more improved, more detail.”

In contrast to the previous participant, in this quotation, the professional acknowledges that Tusla may not actually have the information. This points to a key difference between the admission into care of Irish children or children who have been resident in Ireland for a period of time and the admission of separated children who have usually just entered the country. When children who are not “separated children” are brought into care, Tusla generally have access to information about the child or young person from the child themselves, family members and professionals engaged with the young person. Often, Tusla will have considerable involvement with the family prior to the admission: One residential care worker pointed to the “wealth of information ... from the moment they are born” that is often available in relation to other entrants to care and there being “lots of different avenues where you can tap into the information”. This contrasted with separated children where such information was “very, very limited”. A Tusla professional who was interviewed indicated that there should be no reason why the intake assessment is not shared with the staff caring for young people, information that would include family history, pre-migration experiences, and screenings in relation to trafficking and vulnerabilities. She indicated that this information is shared. However, she highlighted that the level of information available would not be like what the residential care staff might be used to with other cohorts:

“But I think what some of the newer providers are struggling with is, people are used to doing what they’re doing. And they may have worked with kids that are coming from, you know, the local teams, and they’re used to getting this and this and this ... This child is not Irish. We don’t have a family history. We don’t have a social history. We don’t have a medical history. We don’t know whether he was vaccinated when he was a baby, and you know what I mean? ... and I think that can be quite anxiety-inducing, maybe, for some new providers ...”

In addition, with limited time to establish relationships, particularly given the volume of referrals, some young people may be hesitant to speak or open up when they have just arrived in the country. The literature points to the fact that that is likely to often be the case, given the difficulties young people may have in trusting (e.g. Ní Raghallaigh, 2013; Eide et al., 2021). This suggests the importance of revisiting the initial assessment over time, once relationships are established.

Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs)

As noted earlier in this report, Tusla’s use of Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs) has been a source of criticism. However, little is known about these accommodation settings. Participants in this

study shed some light on their use for accommodating separated children, pointing to differences between these and other care arrangements, particularly as regards staffing, facilities, and resources.

Staff training was identified as a key difference between the settings. While the norm is that children's residential centres are staffed by qualified social care workers, in the case of some of the residential centres for separated children (supported care accommodation), many are now staffed by a mix of social care workers and others, including health care professionals. SEAs had no requirement to be staffed by social care workers. One participant, who had worked in both SEAs and in other residential settings, spoke of this and referenced the lack of training provided for staff:

"It's not a good place for a beginner ... but they hire a lot of beginners even though they don't provide the proper training ..."

The professional background/training received by staff is likely to impact how situations are responded to. One Tusla professional pointed to the experience that the staff in mainstream residential centres have working with separated children, and how there were "teething problems" for staff without this experience, given the "learning curve" they faced. She pointed to the differences:

"Safety, spotting things, managing things, managing risk, seeing needs, being able to de-escalate a situation, being able to know when to intervene, how to intervene, what to do in situations that are sensitive, potentially dangerous."

Several participants – both Tusla and non-Tusla – voiced the opinion that there was less interaction between staff and young people in SEAs and that the support provided was not as strong. One Tusla professional suggested that the differences in interaction might be related to qualifications:

"Interaction with staff is definitely something that, and it could be the qualified staff versus unqualified staff part of it, where young people might say, like there's a lot more involvement in a Section 5 or a residential versus maybe the interaction that children have with staff in SEAs. So, in terms of key working and, yeah, getting the placement plans and getting those key working sessions started and showing SEAs how to do those, those pieces of work with young people. Yeah. But that's definitely something that children might say when they do move to an SEA or move to a Section 5 or a [residential home] that they do notice the difference. And, you know, they have an allocated key worker and you know, they're getting, there's maybe activities within the house that they do with the other young people, which maybe they don't get to do in the SEAs."

Similarly, a participant who had worked in both SEAs and registered residential centre pointed to the fact that in the registered centre, there were more staff on duty, with a key-worker system in place and a “person-centred approach” being used, which he said was not the case in the SEAs. He pointed too to the fact that staff in SEAs were primarily agency workers rather than permanent staff, thus suggesting a lack of consistency in care, something which would be important for relationship building with young people.

Opinions varied on whether young people had more freedom in one setting versus another. One Tusla professional was of the opinion that SEA staff were sometimes more risk averse, perhaps because of not being qualified in social care, and that this resulted in them not allowing as much flexibility. On the other hand, the participant who had previously worked in SEAs and now worked in a regulated setting indicated that young people had more freedom in SEAs, freedom which he considered to be detrimental. This participant spoke of the importance of the routines within children’s residential homes, which were not in place in SEAs, at least when he worked in them:

“Of course, you know I found that in [name of residential centre] like young people are complaining about ... They have a rule to follow in the house. It’s good, you know. It’s good for the development of the kid. We do follow, not really a curfew, we follow our timetable to sleep, you know, because some of them are going [to] school. Some of them are doing part-time [jobs]. So they need a proper rest: So we do follow a sleeping pattern. Good pattern, you know, but not in the emergency homes. So some people are telling [us] that emergency homes are better because they don’t have a proper guidance there instead of we are guiding, and we are providing a proper care. There, they are only providing a setting to sleep, and they can roam around the city ...”

Related to the points that were made about levels of freedom and supervision, concern was expressed too about a potential increased risk of children going missing and of trafficking and exploitation of young people placed in SEAs, given the level of support from staff was not as high. One NGO participant suggested that where young people are not adequately supported in accommodation settings the situation becomes “very ripe for exploitation by traffickers”. It was suggested by a Tusla professional that many of the children who go missing do so shortly after their arrival in Ireland, sometimes even before Tusla’s SCSIP team have had a chance to see them. She suggested that this raised concerns about Ireland as a transit country but that it was unclear if they were more likely to go missing from SEAs. Another Tusla professional highlighted that the number of children going missing when “settled” in care was very low, therefore pointing to the potential importance of settings that are longer term rather than temporary, like SEAs.

Beyond staffing and levels of interaction with young people, there was also a perception that registered residential centres were better resourced than SEAs, in terms of finances available to staff and the building and facilities available (e.g. bigger premises; a car attached to the house). This may result in the rights of young people being more easily upheld in centres that are not SEAs and in their needs being more easily met. Regarding financial resources, for example, the participant who had worked in SEAs before moving to a registered centre, expressed that the weekly budget that staff had for spending on young people was significantly more in the registered centre. One young person moved from one centre to another within a short time of arriving in Ireland. In the second centre, he was sharing a room with four other boys: this appeared to be an SEA. He contrasted the two centres, referencing the fact that in the second setting, he needed to “beg” for basic essentials:

“Yeah the [first] accommodation was quite good, there was no problem with the staff or anything, but once we were moved to [the second place] so the first thing is that the staff there they were like really strict with everything. Yeah, so if you want something from the shop, they don’t really get that thing to you ... well, you have the right to ask for it, yes that’s what I knew after a long, long time ... so let’s say, I want a toothbrush or stuff like that, you have to like beg them for it so they can get it to you.”

Related to the fact that this boy was sharing with four others, several professional participants identified room occupancy as a key difference between SEAs and other settings. Whilst in registered residential centres, children are expected to have their own bedrooms under HIQA’s standards (HIQA, 2018), this is not the case in SEAs. In fact, it is also not the case in relation to some other residential settings, under Tusla’s 2023 protocol on supported care accommodation for young people seeking international protection, as discussed in Chapter 2. In these settings, children are likely to be sharing. One Tusla professional spoke about the impact of not having one’s own room, pointing to the challenges this posed in relation to young people’s right to privacy:

“... A child does not have access to privacy at a really difficult time of their life ... as in, arrived to a new country, not having a clue what’s going on? They don’t speak English, they don’t necessarily have a common language, and culturally they’re a bit all over the place, maybe starting school, making friends in a new location, carrying all that trauma, and they’re teenagers. And I think this is what we forget all the time about that. They’re teenagers. They need their privacy. Do you know what I mean? Like, they need somewhere to hide ... They need somewhere to go and be able to cry and not have anybody see it. They need to be able to wake up in the middle of the night and feel a bit scared, and be able to figure out their own way of how am I going to manage this right now?”

Tusla staff highlighted that efforts were being made to close SEAs. A senior Tusla practitioner emphasised the “need to have a vision that we won’t be using [SEAs] anymore” and highlighted the additional residential centres that had been established and the work also being done to improve SEAs in the interim, particularly as regards interaction with children and communication with the SCSIP team, in order to enhance standards of care. Another Tusla professional highlighted that the team was “constantly trying to upskill [the SEA staff], constantly trying to bring the SEAs in line as much as possible with mainstream [residential centres]”. Participants highlighted the appointment of SEA coordinators, posts which ensured better connections between the SCSIP team and the staff in the SEAs. A Tusla professional was of the view that these appointments had resulted in improvements:

“... Since the coordinators have been expanded and more have gone into post, you can see the quality of the SEAs has been improved. Each week – I did have two young people in SEAs and there was individual works coming through, being emailed to me. There were placement plans, there were constant updates ... and previously we wouldn’t have got those pieces. So there definitely has been improvements but there is probably a bit more to go.”

It was acknowledged by Tusla staff who participated that the governance of SEAs was not as good as the governance of registered centres. As discussed in Chapter 2, SEAs are not subject to inspection from HIQA or ACIMS, though they are overseen by PASM.

It was, however, also noted that while Tusla was focused on limiting the use of SEAs, moving young people from them to better accommodation as soon as possible, sometimes young people did not wish to leave SEAs. Tusla professionals acknowledged that sometimes this was due to the location of SEAs, which tended to be in Dublin or close to Dublin, but was also due to young people getting enrolled in schools or English language programmes, making friends, being close to the mosque and generally starting to settle, but then having to move again. One Tusla social worker stated in relation to some young people’s refusal to move from SEAs that it was “probably understandable because they’ve moved and moved and moved and maybe when you are settling down and then you’re being asked to move again ...” This points to a key challenge for professionals trying to facilitate resettlement during stays in SEAs when ultimately young people will move on from these settings.

Lack of access to care: Age disputes

When a child or young person arrives alone, if they indicate that they are under 18, they are referred to Tusla who conduct an “eligibility for services assessment” to determine if the child is eligible for services under the Child Care Act 1991; this includes determining if the child is under the age of 18.

Professionals in NGOs working with separated children were particularly concerned about “age disputes” where young people were not accepted as being under 18 and therefore deemed ineligible for care provision. The findings suggested that there were several ways in which “age-disputed” separated children came to the attention of NGO staff. Some participants who provided services in adult International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) accommodation themselves identified young people living there whom they felt looked like children. In other instances, the NGO staff were made aware of young people by other residents who were concerned about them. In addition, young people themselves sometimes sought help from NGOs when their age was not believed.

While the issue of age assessment was discussed at length in interviews with professionals – particularly those working in NGOs, as will be discussed below – only one young person who was interviewed talked about this issue. This is perhaps not surprising given that all of those young people who were interviewed had been in care or accommodated by Tusla care and thus had been accepted as being under 18. The young person who did raise it, spoke about it in the context of expressing the view that “the system seems a bit broken”, and provided the example of his age not initially being believed upon arrival:

“Well, first I went to the IPO and they asked about my age. When I said that I’m under 18, they took me to Tusla ... Then yeah and there I met someone, a social worker ... when I met him and he asked me a few questions, like the way I came in, where am I from, and how old am I ... So, after that, saying all that, then he said, ‘do you have a proof that’s like an ID or anything, a birth certificate?’ I gave him both the ID and the birth certificate but then he was not convinced ... yeah until we had an argument about it so ...”

Following a discussion with the social worker via an interpreter – which the young person described as involving “a barrier with the accent” as the interpreter was not from his country – this young person’s age was accepted on the day of his arrival and he was placed in an emergency centre run by Tusla. However, he also spoke of another friend whose age was not believed and spent several months in adult accommodation as a result.

Professionals working in NGOs who supported residents of adult IPAS accommodation played a particularly important role in identifying and supporting age-disputed young people. One professional, working with an NGO in IPAS accommodation, described their role in such instances:

“So then our role would be to just make sure that the person understands exactly what it means to be deemed an adult, and whether or not they want to access an appeal to the initial decision that was given by Tusla on their eligibility assessment. And we would help them just to kind of write to both the IPO and to Tusla to say that, you know, ‘I am this person. This is

my date of birth, and I wish to be seen as a minor in the eyes of the state,’ and that then should trigger Tusla to invite the person, if they haven’t already gone under the eligibility assessment to do one, and if they have done one, and they want to appeal, then yes, it would hopefully trigger the appeals assessment, and we would go along with the person if they require, and just in a very kind of informal role and purely accompaniment.”

The complexity of conducting age assessments was highlighted by Tusla professionals who participated. There was a clear sense that this was work that they did not like and that it was a source of stress for them as professionals. One Tusla professional described it was “not a nice process” and “not one that people will always get right”. Another Tusla professional stated:

“Nobody likes doing them. We all hate doing them. And they’re anxiety inducing ... not for me, at this stage. They’re not because ... I’m confident in my assessment, as much as you can be with something that is just not an exact science. When you have newly qualified social workers, or when you have people that are new to the team, it’s a very anxious time for them, because they do not want to make a mistake, because this is somebody’s life and future.”

There was acknowledgement that people from different cultural backgrounds will age differently and that the journeys young people have travelled on also have an impact. There was an understanding too of the negative implications of getting the assessment wrong:

“If you get it wrong, and you deem a 15-year-old an adult, you know they’re placed in adult accommodation and that’s not a nice thing to do. And that means, you’ve changed the course of their life. And that’s something that’s quite hard. And then the other side as well, you know, if you have someone that you’ve deemed an adult or vice versa. You’ve deemed a minor. They’re placed in a centre with children. And then something happens. While they’re in, you know ... And then it turns out that they were actually an adult.”

Concerns about the age assessment process

Several NGO participants voiced concerns about the manner in which age assessments were conducted, about the lack of an independent appeals mechanism for young people who were “deemed adult”, and about the length of time these processes took.

Regarding how assessments of age were conducted, participants referred to Tusla assessing young people in relation to their eligibility for services. It was felt by NGO participants that the basis on which decisions were made about age appeared flawed. Decisions were made by social workers who

interviewed the young people. Medical age determination methods, such as bone density tests, are not currently utilised. According to NGO participants, social workers interviewed the young people and took into account factors such as physical appearance, though Tusla professionals indicated that they were no longer allowed to take 'physicality' into account. One NGO participant stated that young people were not believed to be under 18 if they engaged with social workers *"on an equal-like basis"*, and voiced the view that this rationale was flawed given the life experiences of the young people:

"We still see decisions being issued, refusing people who have presented documents, on the basis of young people engaging with the social workers on 'an equal like basis' ... So they must be an adult because they looked us in the eye and they engaged ... Didn't feel like you're engaging with a child at any point. The young person was engaging on an 'equal like basis'. I mean, this young person has walked from Afghanistan or Somalia, and has had to assert themselves, probably as the head of the family for years before that. It's just a completely inadequate reasoning."

Similarly, another professional talked about Tusla determining that the person spoke in a way "that is older than their years". He raised his concerns with this:

"I've met eloquent 15-year-olds. Talk to me about multiple topics that ... You know, highly intelligent. So where the person is like, 'What am I supposed to do? Just talk dumb? So you believe me that I'm a child?' ... It can be incredibly frustrating for the child afterwards."

It was recognised by NGO and Tusla professionals that young people face difficulties in "proving" their age when it is disputed. These difficulties relate to trauma (e.g. inconsistencies in information they provide due to the impact of trauma), cultural differences (e.g. coming from countries where people do not necessarily know their dates of birth), language and interpretation challenges, and difficulties obtaining acceptable documentation. In addition, it was acknowledged that sometimes young people give different information about their age and other factors, including different versions of birth certificates. Tusla professionals expressed an understanding of why this happens but also highlighted the complexity of the decision-making, taking these kinds of factors into account:

"I suppose we understand why children do give different dates of birth as they're going through Europe. You know, you might have a young person who's had care experience in Belgium. And then they left the service because the date of birth that they gave them was turned 18, but they arrived to us and they say, well, no, actually, I'm still 17. And you have to give the benefit of the doubt here. But we do things, like we contact Belgium. We see if we can speak to their social worker, like all those things. We do try to, you know, make as much

contact as we can, especially with the UK as well. And we try to exhaust all of those measures before a decision is given.”

Not having sufficient information available made decision-making more difficult. One Tusla professional stated:

“The biggest thing is the gap of information provided, you know, in terms of the actual decision-making ... there would be a gap of information or a lot of conflicting information. But again, that’s understandable. Children have come from areas of conflict. There’s a lot of trauma there.”

Regarding documentation, it was recognised that it was very difficult – if not impossible – to get documentation from some countries. In addition, verification of documentation was an issue. One professional was critical of the fact that documents provided by young people to show their age were often not accepted by Tusla as they were not “verified” and the IPO “has thus far refused to verify them”. A Tusla professional also expressed frustration in relation to the fact that the IPO did not verify documents.

Professionals voiced concerns too about the absence of an independent appeals mechanism, where a young person wanted to “appeal” a decision that was made about their age. Instead, the initial decision could be reviewed by social workers but these social workers were from the same team as the social workers who made the initial decision that deemed the young person to be an adult. One participant, working in an NGO, stated:

“There’s a clear lack of independence. They recognised this and committed to an appeal mechanism. But that hasn’t been commenced yet. We’re told due to difficulties recruiting the appeal board ...”

Another NGO professional reported that on some occasions the same social workers who carry out the initial assessment also conduct the review, with the same questions being asked. He outlined the frustration that this causes for young people:

“The same questions are asked again ... which leads to a lot of frustration because the young person has been asked these questions. They’ve gone through this before, and the first time they weren’t believed. So they’re like, ‘I can’t say anything different this time, so are they going to believe me?’ So there’s quite a bit of fear, anxiety, frustration, even before they get into the room.”

Tusla professionals who took part were also eager for an independent appeals mechanism to be put in place. It was suggested that the delay was due to a lack of resources and people not applying to be on the independent panel. It was indicated that progress was being made, with members of the appeals panel currently sitting in on assessments to see how they are completed:

“So, they join in to see how it’s done, and then eventually the hope is that they will, the appeals panel, will just manage all of the eligibility assessments. And that isn’t up and running yet. And that’s purely down to, I believe, resources, people applying to do it, and just getting it started ... So, because that isn’t up and running, generally the eligibility assessments are done by people in this service. Not maybe on the duty team, but on the wider social work team. So, that’s definitely something that everyone wants to come on board, that this appeals panel comes in place, because it will erase the stress from the team, and also the independent piece is there then for the eligibility assessments. But it’s just not in place yet.”

The length of time that it took for assessments of age or reviews/appeals of these assessments to take place was also raised as an issue. One participant who had previously worked in a reception centre for adults, spoke of referring young people to Tusla for age assessment but considerable time passing before these assessments took place. During this period in which they were waiting, young people sometimes turned 18 or were transferred to other centres, thus perhaps losing contact with the worker who was supporting them. While delays in undertaking assessments seemed to have eased since the period this professional was referring to, Tusla highlighted that there was sometimes a need to pause assessments to allow young people the opportunity to secure paperwork to show their age.

Another professional indicated that in instances where the age-disputed minor is approaching their 18th birthday, they engage in additional advocacy to ensure services are provided before the age of majority is reached. However, she acknowledged that this in turn can lead to disruption, with young people moving into care for just a period of weeks before then moving out of care again:

“Often we would do additional advocacy if someone is approaching their 18th birthday and then Tusla, will meet someone two weeks or three weeks before their 18th birthday, might take them out of the adult accommodation centre. They’ve been into care for three weeks, and then they’ll be you know, out of care again. So it ends up being like, disruptive.”

A Tusla professional pointed to efforts to improve their work regarding age assessment. It was noted that centres were now being established to accommodate young people whose age was in the process of being determined, highlighting that this was to ensure protection:

“... and that’s really about protection because, you know, it’s really, really challenging. We’ve got, you know, 800 and something young people that we’re looking after. And we have to try and make sure to minimise the risk.”

Other improvements included facilitating young people to have advocates present, providing staff with appropriate training, ensuring best practice by looking at international approaches, giving the benefit of the doubt, and tightening up on timeframes. It was acknowledged that despite the various improvements, these assessments would continue to be “challenging and difficult”. It was noted also that under the legislation, Tusla should not in fact be responsible for age assessment:

“I think the difficulty is that like, we’re not really, like, legislatively, we are not responsible for age assessment. That lies with the Department of Justice. I mean, they, you know, that’s where it should be placed. And we’ve been fighting for years and years for that piece to be taken on, to be recognised ... Well, it’s very clear in legislation that it is their role. But what’s happening is that when young people are referred to us, we do an eligibility for – services assessment. So, do we deem the eligibility for services under the Child Care Act? And we’ve had to do that.”

Overall, there was evidence of frustration in relation to age assessment from all professional quarters. For Tusla social workers, there was a sense that the consideration they gave to age assessment and the “massive effort to give that benefit of the doubt” was not recognised and that NGOs wrote letters to advocate for young people which seemed to suggest that Tusla simply didn’t care. One social worker described this as “very frustrating”. A colleague agreed:

“Especially when a social worker has put in a massive amount of effort to give that benefit of the doubt. And then it is a negative decision. And then we get these letters saying, you know, what have you done to explore their age? You know, it is ... It’s very exhausting for the social worker involved ... And it’s, you know, I think in those letters it can come across as if there is a lack of care or ...”

From the NGO perspective, one professional who was involved in supporting age-disputed young people, indicated that the relationship with Tusla “can be challenging”, describing it as “not massively super-friendly” but said “we act together just for the benefit of the person in hand”.

Implications of age disputes for young people

Practitioners expressed significant concern about the implications of age disputes on young people. When a young person was not accepted to be under the age of 18, there were significant

ramifications in terms of the supports they received. Whereas in the past, such young people would have gone to live in direct provision, which in itself was considered problematic, in the current context, a young person who was “deemed adult”, was likely to be placed in an emergency centre, in a large reception facility (such as City West) or in tented accommodation. Given the Irish government’s inability to accommodate many adult male international protection applicants since 2023, there was even a risk of street homelessness for some young people. Indeed, the Irish Refugee Council in 2023 reported on cases of unaccompanied minors being made homeless due to age disputes in their “Now I Live on the Road” research. A professional in an NGO voiced the opinion that children placed in adult accommodation expressed feeling “scared” and “confused”.

The inappropriateness of living in adult accommodation was identified by several participants. For example, one participant described this as “not ideal” and referenced the concern that other residents had for one particular age-disputed young person:

“It’s not ideal for any child to be alone in an adult centre ... And we found that I mean, we found a 16-year-old [...] kid in a centre, with 400 single male adults, and even the residents themselves were concerned about how young this person was, so like everyone around them are saying, this person is very young. Culturally, they’re saying, this person is very, very young. He’s not at an age that would reflect an adult. So it can be quite frustrating. Then when the authorities aren’t reacting in the same kind of concern as we are ...”

The same participant also reported being notified of an Afghan young person living in tented accommodation with members of the Afghan community. This young person didn’t want his age to be discussed as he didn’t want to move away from people of his own background. Similarly, another participant, from a different NGO, also highlighted precarious living circumstances, this time homelessness:

“So certainly we’ve met young people who have presented as children, have had documentation confirming that they are children, and yet they have been refused accommodation at IPAS. They have not been taken into care of Tusla, and instead, they’re left to, you know, figure everything out alone, including being street homeless ... refused, because they see them as a young male, and therefore fit to walk the streets alone.”

The risk of trafficking and exploitation of those who are age-disputed was also highlighted by an NGO participant:

“I mean, we had an age-disputed child coming down, and I mean, she was getting a lift from this man every time she came to the office, and [I was thinking], I’m really uncomfortable

with this. And it's really difficult to know what to do now, you know, she was kind of assuring me, 'You know his wife is there as well,' and things but you just don't know. People are at such risk. And people, you know, if they are kids like they could have left home at 14 or 15, they're so vulnerable and looking for attention and support, and somebody to care about them."

Participants referred also to the staffing in these centres: staff were there to accommodate adults, not to care for children/young people. This contrasted sharply with the narratives of the participants who worked in registered centres for separated children who had a clear "caring" mandate and who provided services in line with that. Concern was expressed by one professional who indicated that staff in the centre for adults in which she worked were not Garda vetted and that she was denied the opportunity by her organisation to be Garda vetted on the basis that her remit did not include working with children, even though she was aware of children residing in the centre. Another participant, working in an NGO, reported that the National Vetting Bureau indicated that she didn't qualify for Garda vetting.

Disputes about the ages of young people also had implications for access to other services, not just care. Professionals who participated explained that those who indicated that they were children but who were not accepted as such by Tusla were referred back to the IPO, who then recorded "deemed adult" instead of a date of birth on their IPF1 form (a form that records basic details following the initial interview). However, in order to facilitate access to the daily expenses allowance that adults receive, as well as other social services, the Department of Social Protection give them a date of birth to make them 18. However, the young person is not given a copy of any documentation that indicates their assigned date of birth. According to participants, delays are often experienced in accessing a Public Services Card as the young people cannot prove their age. Professionals who participated in the research recounted difficulties for young people in accessing education also, with one participant indicating that mainstream education can become "off limits" stating that "secondary schools aren't going to take a risk on having an adult possibly in their school". Challenges or delays in accessing medical cards and medical services were also raised. For example, one NGO staff member recounted the experience of a young person who had been deemed to be an adult and given an adult date of birth. The young person had an accident, which resulted in him needing hospital treatment. He was brought to a children's hospital:

"[The children's hospital] refused to take them, because they said, 'You have an adult date of birth, and we can't treat you here.' Then they tried to go into the [adult hospital], and they're like, 'No, you're a child. You need to go to elsewhere.' And only for a doctor who is

from the same country of origin, basically just took charge and said, 'I'm taking this person under my care. Anything that happens, I'm taking responsibility,' the person wouldn't have been seen, so it has massive knock-on effects, as you say, going forward for different things, like accessing medical services. It leaves a lot of grey areas which can be detrimental for the child."

Perhaps of most significance though was the fact that adults (or those "deemed adult") had fewer family reunification rights. As such, the decision to decide that a young person was an adult, and not a child, had very significant implications not only for the young person themselves but also for their family members. Under Irish law governing family reunification, separated children with refugee status or subsidiary protection are entitled to have their parents and siblings under the age of 18 join them. This is not the case for anyone aged 18 or over, who is only entitled to family reunification with their husband or wife or civil partner and with their minor children, if applicable. One participant outlined the harsh reality of this:

"Well, they don't have a right to bring their parents and siblings. So yeah ... So, young people whose ages are disputed continue to be issued with Ministerial Decisions Unit letters that say 'disputed age' or 'deemed adult', and then in brackets 'disputed date of birth', and then they give the date of birth. Then that document follows them throughout their lives. It's extremely difficult ... [The impact of this document is] well, for a family reunification, it excludes them from family reunification."

Some young people were reported to be under "terrible pressure from home" to be recognised as a refugee so that family reunification could be achieved. The same participant spoke about a young person whose age was disputed and the impact that this had on him:

"It was bordering on him becoming seriously, mentally ill over this, it was. It became an obsession to the extent that we sat every day for weeks on end with him crying, 'Why don't they believe me?' ... And that's when I realised that he's under serious pressure from home ... He had failed basically to do what he was supposed to do, which was come to Ireland, prove that he was a child, and everybody else gets to come. He had failed in that, and he saw that as a failure, and it was a very, very stressful ... trauma on top of trauma. You know what I mean? This child was, this young person was dealing with the death of his father having been murdered by the Taliban, you know. So there was that, plus everything else. So it was extremely stressful, and it was extremely difficult to watch him in that space."

Given the very different rights of an 18-year-old compared with a 17-year-old (such as the right to education and family reunification rights) there was recognition that some people may claim to be

minors when they are not. However, it was also recognised that some people may indicate that they are adults when in fact they are children. A participant providing NGO services in an IPAS centre referred to an example of a young person who informed him that his dad had changed his age on his travel document to 19 (from 16) in order to help him travel with fewer restrictions. This professional's experience, along with the experience of others, suggested that while suspicion often arose about people who claimed to be children and who were not believed as such, if a child presented as an adult, this was just accepted:

"And [his father] basically changed the date of birth on them to make him a 19-year-old. The dad did this so he'd be able to move more freely, and he just thought he'd be able to work then as well when he came to Ireland. So, he presented those documents to the state. So, the state is like, okay, your document says you're 19. That's fine. No problem. Off you go into your single male centre."

Another participant also referred to instances where children had been told to indicate that they were adults:

"We had two young boys come through, and we thought they were very young, but they kept saying they were 18. And eventually one of them came over and goes, 'I'm really scared. I lied. And people told me if I lie and I'm found out, they'll deport me.' And we identified a pattern among a lot of the boys [from that country] coming through, and it was the exact same story. They were all underage. They were saying the same story of why they had come to Ireland. They had been trafficked in. But they'd all been told to lie and say they were 18. Because they were told, that's how you get work. You won't be allowed to work if you're under 18. We were worried that they were being trafficked, and if they were, we needed something to be done."

The need to have a system in place to assess age was recognised. However, it was suggested that where age was unclear or in dispute, the benefit of the doubt should be given and that there should be an appropriate accommodation setting to cater for young people in that position:

"I think benefit of the doubt should always be given to the young person in question, and maybe just have ... a step-down facility or a transitional facility for someone, until at least they can be kept there until a decisive decision is finally made, and then they have no doubts one way or the other, and which direction they go – back into Tusla or they are accommodated by IPAS."

While NGO staff were not confident that Tusla gave the benefit of the doubt, something which has also been highlighted in the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) submission on the EU Migration Pact (OCO, 2025), Tusla staff had a different view:

"... We very much heavily err on the side of [giving the] benefit of the doubt ... our assessments are holistic. They look at everything as much as you can. We don't do medical assessments. So it's, as I say, it's an absolutely inexact science ... it's a difficult process, and I think more often than not, people will err on the side of benefit of the doubt rather than make a mistake that might impact a young person's life. And that absolutely does mean that sometimes there are adults getting into the system. That's just a matter that's just a fact."

A professional who worked in a reception centre for a large number of adult men and came across a number of age-disputed young people while there, described the Tusla concern about placing adults in children's settings as "very ironic":

"Well, that's very ironic. Then when it's the other way around [children being placed in adult centres] and they're saying, 'Well, it's okay to put this possible child into a migration centre with up to a thousand men?' Like, you know, weigh the risk against the reality, you know what I mean ... This risk is unbalanced."

A Tusla participant also referred to a recent development whereby a centre had opened for 'age-disputed' young people, in an effort to ensure young people would not be placed in adult accommodation while the age determination process was ongoing.

The international protection process

As well as being situated within the care system, separated children and young people are also part of the international protection system. Those from Ukraine are recipients of temporary protection and hence do not need to go through the international protection application process. In the case of separated children from other countries, in keeping with the International Protection Act 2015, applications for international protection are made by Tusla on their behalf: separated children cannot make an application themselves. In keeping with the literature (Oldroyd et al., 2022), the findings suggest that for at least some of the young people, this was a stressful aspect of their lives in Ireland. One young person stated:

"When you come in first, the thing is that you think about your status here, when you are going to get your refugee status or when you are not, and where you're going to give your fingerprints, so this really makes you think a lot ... And after that, when you give your

interview or give your questionnaire back, so then you start thinking what's the response that they're gonna give me?"

Professionals also referred to the stress involved in the process, including around the waiting involved, whether for the interview itself or for the outcome. Reference was made to the international protection process not being child-friendly and to its "adversarial" nature. One residential care worker stated that "the fear of God is put into them throughout the process". Similarly, a Tusla professional described the process as "very hostile":

"The international protection process is not child-friendly. It's not child-centred at all. I don't know how much that can be done with that ... It's just a very adversarial process ... it's very hostile. If you have young people who've come from, who've had really bad experiences with figures of authority, like it's not warm. It's not welcoming. You've security men blocking you from getting into the door ... that process is really, really daunting as it is."

Another residential care worker spoke about a young person who felt "terrified" of the interview and relied on staff to support him in relation to this:

"I suppose the unique challenge is, in particular, the waiting periods for these young people around their [international protection] process. That's massive at the moment, and like with a young person that he hasn't been with us very long. He's been in the country a while, and he's going for his first IPO meeting, and he is terrified, so that's huge. And he doesn't have, I suppose, the support network. It's a lot of reliance on us. But then, I suppose a lot of these young people come to us."

Another participant indicated that she and her colleagues are "there to support them, regardless of the outcome". The data suggest that the support offered included providing information, helping the young people manage the stress, providing practical support and providing reassurance. Another residential care worker outlined her role and that of colleagues in relation to the interview:

"The build-up of it is anxiety, and it's increased conversations that you know they'll seek reassurance from us. We might not have the answers, but we're there to offer them the emotional support, and we bring them up for the day. You know we try to make it a less stressful day. And then, after their interview we get them their favourite food because everyone likes to eat a nice meal after a tough day. And we try to pack them a lunch so that they can bring water with them. Be prepared."

She also described the anxiety after the interview and the disappointment if there was not a positive outcome. Again, it was evident that residential staff supported young people during this period:

“But then there’s so much anxiety throughout that, three, four, five months that they’re waiting for a decision. And then the decision comes. And it’s a no, it’s obviously very disappointing. And then there’s so much worry because they don’t know. If they do get to appeal, the decision, and the appeal can go on for months to a year. But again, that’s just something that they’re still waiting on and waiting on and waiting on. A lot of uncertainty, and like they’re, you know, we can only encourage them, and their Legal Aid Board solicitor would encourage them. Just continue on with your life. Focus on the things in your school. You’re in care, Tusla. Anyway, it doesn’t impact the placement to remain here until there’s a final decision after the appeal, but with that going on for months, that delays their status. Then they leave care, then not having a status means that they, you know, aren’t eligible for healthcare services. Yeah. And then they need to go into IPAS.”

Similarly, the impact of negative decisions was referred to by a Tusla professional who participated:

“Like, I had a young person who, he was engaging in school and he was doing really, really well, in Youthreach, and he got a negative decision on his application. And when he got that negative decision, he just withdrew from everything. But, like, it just kind of, like, it impacted his mental health so much. It impacted his attendance at school. And then, you know, it just had such a devastating impact on him ...”

Concerns were also expressed about delays in the process. For example, a young person stated:

“The other thing is that like once you come in as a minor, they don’t take you to the IPO directly and that’s something they have to work on ... so whoever comes here, they can get their fingerprints as soon as possible. Because when I came in, I was delayed for, like, let’s say one-and-a-half or two months before I got my fingerprints.”

He described why this was a problem:

“because let’s say a lot of boys or let’s say girls who come here, they even want to like process their cases faster, whoever wants to do like family reunification and stuff like that ... so they don’t even know and, for example me, I was like, you know, in depression, anxiety as well, thinking about what’s gonna happen.”

Delays in applying for international protection were identified by a Tusla professional also. She suggested that these delays can come into play due to capacity constraints on the SCSIP team’s duty system:

“Well, I think the delay starts because of when they’re on duty and it’s us getting a child around to the International Protection Office to just apply for their, like, for their application

... The social worker has to do the application with the young person, and then we have to identify someone to bring ... We could bring ten kids around – in one day, which isn't personal, you know, like, you're not getting to spend time with the child then when you're there to help them apply. So, but then it's actually identifying that worker that day that we can give to these ten kids to get them around."

She also suggested that concerns about age can also delay applications, while delays can also occur within the International Protection Office's system itself, after the application is made. One residential care worker spoke about turning up at the International Protection Office for interviews but the interviews not being able to proceed due to their not being a representative of Tusla present. She described young people as becoming "very frustrated" when this arises. She acknowledged that she expected this to improve as a link worker had now been allocated to the residential home in which she worked, meaning that she now had a contact person to liaise with.

The long wait for decisions in relation to international protection claims was also highlighted as an issue with one Tusla professional stating, regarding those turning 18, that "if a child doesn't have a decision, they are kind of in limbo, in terms of what they can receive, what support they can get." However, in contrast, it was also suggested that very quick decisions also posed challenges. One professional referred to the fact that Somali girls were getting positive outcomes very quickly: this meant that they had no entitlement to IPAS accommodation upon turning 18, resulting in them being thrust into homelessness services very shortly after arrival in Ireland.

A Tusla social worker highlighted that the IPO processes have changed considerably in recent years and highlighted the challenges of keeping up with the changes. She also expressed concern about the fact that the questionnaires are now completed by social workers rather than by the Refugee Legal Service (RLS):

"... We [Tusla social workers] complete the questionnaire of the child now, which used to be completed with the caseworker in the Legal Aid Board in the RLS. We do it now, which I declined to do for a very, very long time, and because I just thought, this is not my remit to do this, and I ... feel like we are doing the child a disservice, if they're not getting legal representation to actually go through the questionnaire with somebody. What happens now is, we do it. And then we go to the Legal Aid Board after the fact, and then it's sort of checked through."

Despite the many complexities of the international protection process and the stresses involved for many young people going through it, one young person talked about the process being

straightforward, although she acknowledged that it still wasn't nice to have to discuss the most difficult part of her life:

“Yeah it was quite straightforward that one, that was straightforward, like not very good, I mean I didn't appreciate the fact that they would be, like, ‘Okay, now let's discuss the worst part of your life’, yeah like sure ... so it was straightforward enough. I had a lawyer.”

Conclusion

This first findings chapter focused on the initial experiences of separated children within the care and international protection systems in Ireland. The findings suggest that basic needs are met for the vast majority of young people, in the form of accommodation, food and basic essentials. However, in the context of a substantial increase in numbers arriving, the state's reliance on Special Emergency Arrangements to accommodate many separated children raised significant concerns among the professionals who were interviewed. In addition, the findings point to the complexity of age assessment and the potential violation of the rights of young people who are “deemed adult”, particularly in the context of an adult international protection accommodation and support system that is at capacity. The chapter also highlighted the very significant stress experienced by young people in the international protection process and the concerted efforts of professionals to support them throughout this process.

Chapter 6: Findings 2: Accessing support and services

Introduction

This chapter looks beyond initial experiences of entering the care and international protection processes, to discuss in more detail the supports available to separated children and young people. It explores the support received from Tusla staff as well as from staff in accommodation settings, drawing attention to some of the complexity at play, including efforts to balance autonomy with care. It examines access to mental health and educational services. The chapter also explores young people's contact with family and the challenges as regards family reunification. In addition, the chapter discusses cultural differences and racism, in terms of how they are experienced by young people and responded to by professionals.

Relationships with Tusla's team for Separated Children Seeking International Protection

Among the young people who took part, experiences of social work support were mixed. Several had positive experiences. One young person talked about meeting their social worker shortly after arrival saying, "she was really nice to me." Another young person, when asked whether he had a specific social worker working with him, indicated that he had regular contact with a social worker whom he could ask to see but who also was proactive in reaching out to him:

"... I did have basically and I was able to talk to her. She would come weekly, once a week ... So I was able to access her ... I was able to tell the staff beforehand that I would like to talk to her ... And yeah, she would basically help me. Oh, she would come herself to talk to you to check if everything's okay. Maybe she'd say she's in the office and the guys are in the kitchen. She would herself come and check, like ask if everything's okay."

When asked how he found this, he stated:

"Helpful. This is just the way to do it, I guess ... The right way to do it."

Another young person talked about his early days in Ireland, living in a residential home, and how "very helpful" his social worker was:

"... When she was there, she was very helpful ... She helped me with, you know, when I get like papers ... like my interview paper. Or some papers from the IPO. She ... first she'd get it, and then I'd get it, you get like two letters. Same. So she'd come to me ... when we meet, we discuss the paper ... She, every time I go to interview, she was with me, like, she was

advocate for me. She was very nice lady ... She just talked to me in a nice way. Like she said, life would be this easier. Like she was just motivation. She was motivating me a lot.”

Experiences were less positive for others, with some identifying that they had no social worker at all or that they had a social worker for a period of time but not consistently. One young person said that he was told to text a social worker if he needed anything but he didn’t have a particular social worker allocated to him. When he moved to a foster family, he said he still did not have a social worker. Overall, his opinion of Tusla was that “it’s a bit slow and let’s say, like, broken ... but everything else it’s lovely.” He said that he was provided with “no information at all” when he arrived. He went on to say:

“... There are some, like, social workers or aftercare workers, they don’t even tell you like your rights or anything, yeah so you don’t know what rights do you have or what you can ask for or anything about that, yeah.”

Another young person described being allocated a social worker on arrival “but then she was removed from me. Instead of a social worker, I had another person from the lower layers of Tusla who wasn’t a social worker, but he needed to do the social worker stuff.” Overall, though, while this young person indicated that he had three different social workers, whom he didn’t see very often, he didn’t perceive this as a problem. He replied as follows when asked how often he saw his social worker:

“[I didn’t see them] very often, probably because I don’t really have any problems, because every time I talk to a new social worker, they have always a list where they ask me basic questions, and by the end they always say that I’m a non-problem guy. I mean, there is nothing they can help me with, because I managed to get to the college, I managed to do there not bad, and I don’t have any illnesses, anything that I need help with, like, absolutely fine. So I don’t see them very often, because there is really no need.”

His words point to his sense of independence, something which will be returned to later in this chapter.

Another young person indicated that she “hated” her first social worker and felt that she was not listened to and was patronised:

“... She was, like, so incredibly dismissive, she was, like, ‘you’re working with a therapist now, you have psychological issues, so, you know, you just need to go easy on yourself, and, like, give yourself space, and, like, relax.’”

She felt that she was not taking her individual needs into account:

“... My thing is that, again, this is about individualistic, my coping skill is actually having a routine, and working towards some major goal, like, every time, when there’s, like, a summer, and even, like, right now, I’m struggling so much, because I don’t have a reason to wake up early ... routine is what actually keeps me ... and I specifically explained that to her, and she still dismissed any of my, like, goals and ambitions, and, yeah, and overall, it was too patronising ... I just felt, at some point, you know, I had my parents ... I got away from them, I don’t need anyone to replace them, I need a person who can advise me on how to better pursue my goals.”

In contrast, this young person described a subsequent aftercare worker as an “angel in my life” and said that she “absolutely loved” her. She pointed to the practical things that this aftercare worker did to allow her to pursue her goals, including advocating for her at more senior levels in Tusla to allow her access to support that would not normally be permitted.

Similar to the young people, professionals who participated had varied experiences of interactions with the Tusla team for SCSIP. Some residential staff, as well as other professionals who participated, pointed to the need for better communication. Interestingly, this was also referred to by a young person who took part. This young person was primarily positive about Tusla but pointed to communication issues:

“I think that the system overall is great. I mean, I can’t add there anything, but I see one problem. It’s the problem in communications between centres. So, there is one centre of, I don’t know, management, another centre of payment, and third of communication with children, teenagers. And what I see is this silo effect. We studied it in the college. So, this happens when the centres of company are not communicating enough good with each other, and they all have their own thoughts, and the data they have is outdated. So, when this happens, some office doesn’t know what the other knows, and reverse. And ... it can lead to anything. So, yeah, what I would do is probably enhance the communication system.”

This well-articulated point, which draws on the young person’s own experience as well as their learning from college, reflects to some degree the views of one manager of a residential setting who expressed the opinion that while individual workers within the Tusla SCSIP team were “brilliant”, overall the team was “very under-resourced”, resulting in a lack of collaboration:

“And what we have experienced as an organisation is that there’s a lot of movement on that SCSIP team, and it seems to be very under-resourced. Any of the people that are there are

brilliant, don't get me wrong. It seems to be very under-resourced. There's a lot of movement. There's not a lot of collaboration when it comes to the care of the young people, and that's something that's quite extraordinary to us, because in [name or organisation], in our enhanced services homes, it's very much collaborative working, and you know, people available, you know, readily available at all times ... It's quite dissimilar, you know, in the SCSIP homes, and that has been quite a challenge, and sometimes you're waiting a significant period of time to get a response from people there ... There's had to be a lot of escalation, and you know, regarding ensuring young people have individual link workers."

However, in contrast, another residential care manager stated:

"I've been very lucky in such a short time to have dealt with the intake separated children's team, and the children in care separated team. Our young people have moved between different teams ... The social work department with the separated children's team I would describe as phenomenal ... Anytime I've requested a social worker to come out and visit, they do. You know, or if I've even asked a social worker to give a young person a phone call, they will, and they've shown the care there as much as all social workers, no matter which department they're in, whether it's separated children or children in care. They have a caseload, and they are hard at it. But the separated children team specifically, they prioritise, actually coming and meeting the young people and doing their statutory visits and making sure that they are okay."

She indicated also, that in her experience, although children in care are entitled to a statutory visit every six months, the separated children's team come to visit every three months.

The views expressed by the two individuals cited above contrast quite sharply with one another. In both instances, the residential settings in question were registered settings, rather than SEAs. It is unclear why experiences contrasted so much.

The findings from interviews with Tusla staff suggested the commitment of staff to the young people and the care and compassion that was felt for their circumstances. One Tusla professional spoke about the relationships that developed over time:

"You build a special relationship, I think, with the young people, you know, because you do things with them like a parent, like you go to the parent-teacher meeting, you'll go to their play, you'll go to their graduation, you know. Some of us have been to the birth of their children, or their weddings – you know, that is a unique experience in social work ... and then ... when they're over 18, then your relationship changes and it's just, you know, but it's

lovely. It's a nice change. I think to go from being the social worker then on to, you know, someone that they can come and talk to about you know, relationship struggles and stuff like that, you know, yeah, there's something very special about that."

However, there was concern that the ability to form these types of relationships was becoming eroded because of capacity constraints. In keeping with the perspectives of some residential care staff, participants from Tusla pointed to a lack of resources and personnel in the context of a substantial increase in the number of separated children arriving and being cared for. This included not having a sufficient number of social workers, despite expansion of the team. For example, in the context of a discussion about the rewarding aspects of working with separated children, where Tusla staff spoke about the relationships that were developed with young people, and bumping into young people years later who want to buy you a coffee, one practitioner commented on the current challenges posed by the increase in numbers:

"... I would worry that the experience of somebody who came through this service six years ago would be different to the experience of somebody who comes through the service today on the basis that, like, there's been a massive increase in staff here. But it pales in comparison to the increase in numbers ... of service users ... And ... when the service has to sustain, I worry that what gets lost, not for everybody, but for some, is that piece of the young person who would want to come back and buy you a coffee because they've had that wonderful experience."

A colleague agreed:

"Yeah, I can echo that. I think it's the biggest challenge, you know, with the ... volume of young people that have come in. And ... you know, as [colleague's name] rightly said, you know, the team has grown and although, you know, we will be getting more staff like ... it's still not enough, you know, to be able to give everyone an allocated social worker and to be able to give them the time that we would have done before, you know, that's the thing."

Similarly, another Tusla professional discussed the challenges of a large caseload and how this impacted on opportunities to meet young people on a one-to-one basis. She indicated that while statutory visits and child in care reviews are completed, less formal engagement was very difficult:

"And you don't want to be that person that they just call or ... you're calling in because ... they're in trouble with the staff or school ... It'd be nice to be able to just call down, you know. Just say, look, I'm just coming down to see you, you know, for a coffee, or meet for ice

cream. That kind of stuff. So it's not always possible. But I think those little things mean a lot to the young people ... especially for the young people who don't trust that easily."

Of particular note is the fact that this professional indicated that she saw young people who were based in Dublin more regularly, as they were able to drop into the office. The shift to having residential homes throughout the country made it more challenging and time-consuming to meet with children in person. She highlighted that she tried to check in regularly via phone but acknowledged that this was "not the same" even if it does mean "quite a bit to the young people".

One young person made an interesting point about whether he had a "right" to a social worker. In doing so, he pointed to a perception that there were others more vulnerable than him, who were perhaps being prioritised:

"They don't let you know your rights at all or anything about it, so I still don't know my rights ... I still, until now, I don't know what's my rights ... am I allowed to have a social worker? Do I have the right to ask for her, or no? And whenever I call them and ask them, they said, there are more people who are more vulnerable and they need social workers more than me."

Of note is that a Tusla professional also referenced a similar point – the need to prioritise young people with more complex needs. She highlighted the worry of not being able to give some young people as much time as others, saying that even if the young person is doing "okay", it can still be "at you" that you have not checked in on them:

"But obviously some cases, as it naturally is, are just more complex than others. And then that young person might be doing really, really well and they're okay, but still, it's still at you, like, that maybe I haven't seen them as much as I should have, but just the demands of other cases and then new allocations coming through. And I think that that can be really difficult, I think, as well, as a worker. Yeah."

There was an acute awareness too among other professionals of the shortage of social workers. One professional, working in an NGO setting, described how things had changed over time in this regard:

"But I also think over the last couple of years for young, for separated children who are in care ... accessing a social worker is a really big challenge, like there's a lack of social workers, it seems. And you know, back in 2016, 2017, when I was working with a lot of separated children, they all had their own social worker, who I could call up and speak to about their case, or about whatever, you know. And you would be on first names basis with a social worker. And now it seems that, it's either the duty social worker or a caseworker and there

isn't actually, maybe enough social workers ... for young people to be getting allocated, specific social workers to support them."

In addition to the perception that support from Tusla was sometimes not available to the extent it might be needed, the findings also suggested some tensions between NGOs and Tusla and frustration on both sides, particularly as regards age assessment (as referenced in the previous chapter) and ageing out of care. However, there was evidence too of Tusla and other organisations working well together to the benefit of young people. For example, one residential care worker spoke about two young people in her unit and the work that the Tusla link worker and an EPIC advocate did on their behalf in relation to accommodation when they turned 18:

"The young people here have a really good link worker. She's part of the SCSIP team, and the difference since she's come on board is massive. So between EPIC and herself, they've gotten the two boys placed together in the same IPAS centre along with a previous mate of theirs who's moved on. So I suppose, like that shows me that when you have the right people advocating for them, these things can happen ... It's just about having enough advocacy ... Had nobody bothered to, you know, pen a letter, or do a couple of follow-up emails and phone calls, the two boys could be placed at different sides of the country. I think we need to be so considerate in the efforts that we're going to, because it can go a long way to make a massive difference for people's lives."

Relationships with staff in residential settings

The narratives of the young people who participated suggested that to a great extent, their experiences in residential settings were shaped by the staff who cared for them. This is in keeping with the general literature on children's residential care and the more specific literature on residential settings for separated children, as discussed in the literature review.

Those who described positive staff relationships referred to a non-judgemental approach and staff being attuned to the boundaries and cues with regard to the timing of interventions and the preference and receptiveness of the young people in their care. For example, one young person was very positive about one of her placements and specifically mentioned the communication style:

Young person (YP): "That was a really nice place. I would go back right now. The staff, the communication that they have ..."

Interviewer: "The way they communicate with you ...?"

YP: “And with other people as well. Not [only] me ... Most people, what they do is, I don’t know how to call it in English, but they judge people without ... any reason. And they will create something in their mind, and they will think that you are that thing. So that’s what I think ... And they will listen to you as well ... Your problem is ... if you have any kind of situation, they will listen. They are willing.”

Similarly, another young person who had lived in a number of residential centres, some of which were SEAs, was positive about some staff, but not others. He described “good staff” as follows:

“They were not ordering you, they were not up on your head ... like ‘do that thing and do this’ ... and, you know, I was like, we don’t like anyone to order anything ... tell you what to do ... they were not like that and they were like friendly, they were nice ... not nosy in your own stuff or asking you what are you going to do.”

Another participant reported mixed experiences with staff relationships but felt more at home when more positive and open communication channels were eventually established in one setting:

“Eventually I became friends with, like, at least half of the staff, and I was, like, fine, and at home. I built my comfort zone eventually. Over time, they learned my boundaries, and then suddenly they’re like, yeah, so this is actually a short-term accommodation, so you cannot stay here more than six months. And I’m like, I don’t want to move, because I like this house.”

In terms of establishing relationships with staff, consistency in staff teams was identified by professionals as important. One residential care worker stated:

“We’ve had the same staff, and we haven’t had anyone change. Our model of care is a relationship model. And so that was always at the forefront for us. And that’s massively made a difference for the young people settling in, and we’ve seen such an increase in them sharing their story, sharing information that they had been sworn to secrecy along their travels. That they were able to actually sit down and say, ‘This is eating me up. Can I just tell you this?’”

In contrast, as was referred to in the previous chapter, it was suggested that there was less consistency in staffing in SEAs. One participant, who had experience working in both an SEA and an approved residential home, referred to this. He himself had worked as an agency worker in SEAs over a one-and-a-half-year period. He contrasted the two types of settings, referring to the “bonds” that developed in approved centres:

“If some trauma happened to them, or if they find it difficult to live here, we can help them in a person-centred way ... It’s because of the permanent staff [team] we have in our unit ... We understand ... But not in the emergency settings ... you know with the availability of staff ... in the [registered centre] we have a bond with the people who are living with us. It’s totally different.”

An NGO participant, who had been working with separated children for many years, voiced concern regarding high staff turnover. She pointed not only to the impact of this on the relationships the young people build, but also to the impact on relationships between care providers and other support services for young people:

“It’s just something that I’ve noticed ... we’re talking a lot about the special emergency accommodation – SEAs. But I get the feeling that there’s maybe, like, quite a high turnover of staff in those kinds of areas. One month someone will contact me from one of them. And then I email him back the following month, and he’s gone. And I wonder how that impacts on people and the relationships they build. And I think again, previously in the past ... we would have known the houses, the residential homes. We would have known them by name, and we would have been on first names basis with the staff in there, and I could have emailed them and said, ‘Hey, we’ve got this project on and have you got any young people that would like to come?’ ... I can remember the names of the houses, whereas now it feels like there’s so many, and they’re all over the place, and like, I’ve heard from young people just that it’s hard living in those places.”

Young people also expressed frustration about staff not interacting with them in a way that worked for them. They spoke about occasions where they didn’t wish to talk to staff members but staff putting pressure on them to do so. For example, one of them felt that staff were “constantly” checking up on her. She did not want to talk but felt this wasn’t respected by staff:

“Basically, they would constantly, like, check up on me, constantly talk to me. I was depressed, I was traumatised, I was burnt out, and I did not want to communicate to anyone at that point. And overall, it didn’t work for me, because [in my home country] I literally pretty much lived alone, from the time I was, like, ten till I was, like, 14 ...”

She recognised that while some young people might need this type of support, it did not work for her. She recognised too the responsibility that the carers had but suggested that “the system did not work” for her:

The point is that I felt like, you know, for some people who are, like, traumatised and have psychological problems, they need this extra communication, extra attention, all the check-ins and everything; for me, it's just, like, overstimulating, I cannot have a safe space when, you know, people are constantly bothering me, and I let them know that I wanted some space, but, like, they didn't hear that. It was, like, their responsibility. I understand that, but the point is that the system did not work for me, yeah, and I'm sure that there are other people who also have different needs, yeah, in terms of freedom and independency."

Another young person described a situation where she had had a disagreement with a staff member and afterwards she went upstairs to her room, but the staff member followed her and entered her room against her wishes:

"And then she came in. And, no, she knocked on my door, and I was like, 'Just go away. I don't want to talk to you. Just go away.' And then because, like, they have keys, and they can just open the door ... Like, even though they're not supposed to just open your door, but they did all of that. Like, when it comes to the rules, they're not supposed to, unless they have a reason."

Although the young person stated that she did not want to talk at that time, she outlined how the staff member insisted that she do so:

"[She said] 'I want to talk to you right now' ... She said that she saw that she was entitled to come in and, like, just start talking to me. And I was like, leave me alone. Because there was this woman in my room and, like, I was like, sitting on the bed, like, leave me alone. And she wants to talk. I'm like, just go away. I don't want to talk to you."

These experiences of young people contrasted with the views of staff in accommodation settings who took part. They spoke of trying to go at the young person's pace. For example, one person working in a residential centre spoke about building up the relationship with young people over time:

"So I suppose we have a lot of trauma-informed care training done within [name of organisation], within ourselves here. So that's kinda I think the biggest thing, is just leaving the kids to themselves and them coming to you for things. Like, over time, your relationship builds up and they're approaching you ..."

She went on to suggest some ways in which she helps to build the relationship with them, such as introducing yourself to their family members, "going out of your way to" help the young people to feel included within the community, and sharing some information in relation to your own

background. She continued, suggesting that young people might themselves put boundaries around that relationship:

“Like building that relationship up and over time, I think it just, it either builds up or they just put a halt to it where they think, that’s enough, you know.”

However, despite these sentiments, the same professional referred to Irish people as being “very good to talk to” but suggested that it was not the same for separated children:

“I’m like very [of the opinion that] you need to get obviously help for trauma. You need to get support around it. You need to talk to a professional. I find a lot of our ... separated children, they just, they don’t see, ‘Why should we be talking? We never had to do it. It’s not a thing that we do in our country.’ That kind of stuff. So that is a huge kind of barrier that we’re currently [facing] ... And we’re always encouraging our kids to talk, to open up. And sometimes they kind of say to us, like, you’re just being nosy. We’re not. We’re trying to get you a bit of help, a bit of support. How to get out of that kind of negative experience that you have.”

This viewpoint, combined with the opinions expressed by some of the young people, perhaps suggests the need for further training for staff to equip them to understand the various ways in which separated children cope with their circumstances and the reasons why they may not wish to talk or open up.

Another residential care worker also spoke about the need to build relationships with young people over time. This participant emphasised the need for a contextualised trauma-informed approach:

“A lot of it is very individualised. A lot of it is having that understanding of the presentation of trauma, and I think that will alone help you build that relationship. And it’s a very slow process for a lot of them ... I find it’s very small key things you can do with these young people, which are your everyday things. Like, I built a great relationship with one of the young people, and all we did was walk. We just went for walks. There was very little chat about anything in particular, but every shift I was on, we generally went for a walk, and after time, then that relationship built up. But I knew, based on where that young person was coming from. He’s from Afghanistan. So I was able to have an understanding, at least of what trauma he was coming from, and I think that’s so important as well, to not only understand trauma [is] so individualised, but the trauma is so dependent on where they’re coming from and their experience. Is it terrorism? Is it war? Is it Mafia? It’s so important to have that understanding.”

Overall, among the residential care staff who participated, there was evidence that they cared greatly for the young people. One residential care worker talked about an occasion that was particularly rewarding:

“It was a Saturday. It was my day off. There was a child. He’s huge into football, and we got him on to a local team here and he was playing a match and he scored a goal. On the same day, I was at it with my daughter and he scored a goal, and he looked over to the sideline ... and I brought my father as well, because my dad was really big into soccer, football ... and he just looked over, and it was like the big, huge smile across his face, and he ran over and hugged me, and ... it was just, I suppose, [I was] his mam in his eyes, you know. She should have been there, and you know, so it was, it was lovely. Yeah.”

Balancing care and autonomy

Often separated children have had a much greater amount of autonomy and independence prior to arriving in Ireland, either in their countries of origin or during their journeys here, perhaps as a result of individual, cultural or contextual factors, or a combination of all. However, upon arrival in Ireland, they are in an unfamiliar context, facing particular risks, being supported by professionals who know little about them. Added to this, they are in the care system. As such, balancing care and autonomy/independence can be a challenge: this was evident from the findings in this study.

Several young people spoke of particular restrictions/safeguards that were in place upon initial arrival in Ireland, whereby leaving their accommodation alone was not allowed. One young person described how he was initially placed with a family for a few days before then moving to a commercial hotel catering for refugee young people from different countries, including Ukraine, and then to a hostel for Ukrainian young people and finally his permanent residential centre. In both the hotel and the hostel, there were staff on site (whom he described as “social workers”)⁶. He described them as being easily accessible if you needed anything. Regarding the hotel, he indicated that staff would accompany you if you needed to buy something:

“Like you could find them definitely. There was no issue in accessing them and whatever you need like. Whichever item you might need to have ... They might go with you personally to buy it. It wasn’t necessarily a group going out, although it was mainly a group going out but ... Yeah, oh, you were not allowed to go by yourself.”

⁶ It is likely that the on-site staff were social care workers or health care assistants rather than social workers.

Asked what he thought of this, he stated:

“Well, I was 17, it was a bit annoying but I understand it ... because I was told by the social workers that there was an incident when ... there was a boy he went out and didn’t come back. So, yeah I understand why the rule is there.”

Another young person was also frustrated by this aspect of her care and felt that while it might be necessary for some young people, it didn’t work for her:

“I’m not saying that, like, the whole approach is bad, it’s good for, like, the majority of unaccompanied minors, I suppose, but to me ... First of all, the fact that I wasn’t allowed to leave alone during the first few days, and they had to, like, check in every, like, two hours, and I had a limit for how long I could be out for, like, the first week or so ...”

For those caring for separated children, there was a balancing act between needing to keep young people safe and needing to protect them from harm. A Tusla social worker who was interviewed stated:

“You’ve literally gotten off a boat or a train, a bus or a plane, or whatever, from wherever it is ... via France, from Somalia, whatever. So our responsibility is to accompany them around the local area. So every young person will have an absence management plan. So every young person, regardless of whether they’re in an SEA, or whether they’re in a Section 5, or whether they’re in a mainstream registered unit, will not have carte blanche to do what they like in the early days, and that has to be reviewed within the first week. And that’s very much a case of, you know, how are they? What am I seeing? What am I viewing?”

She highlighted too that if a young person is in fact not aged under 18, or has lived in IPAS services before being accepted as a minor, or came from the UK first, the restrictions on their autonomy are likely to be more frustrating for them.

In response to a question about how young people are kept safe, one of the residential care workers who participated spoke about needing to give young people independence. His words suggest his awareness of the risks to young people and the need to educate them about those risks, but he highlights the importance of young people being able to act independently:

“I suppose if they’re new to Ireland, we’d obviously do orientations and stuff. We try and educate them as clearly as we can around certain, in terms of like racism, in terms of the riots that went on in Dublin ... The rise in racism and anti-immigration just in those two-and-a-half years is from one side of the scale to the other ... But we are very aware that they are

16 and 17. They want to go to Dublin ... Like that's what they do. All we can do really is try and educate them. Now we have a young person, that's 14 at the moment, it's very different. They can't really go into Dublin city on their own. Obviously. So we would spend a lot of time with that young person on a one-to-one ... and just doing activities. But a lot of them are 16 and 17. They're independent. And yeah, it's just education. That's all we can do, and try and build trust between them and the police. So then they know if something goes wrong in Dublin, to go to the guards [police]. And yeah, I think that's all we can really do."

A Tusla professional also acknowledged the attempts to balance care and independence, drawing attention to the previous experiences of the young people:

"We would always try to promote their independence within reason ... But I think we definitely do take for granted that obviously this young person has travelled through ten different countries to get here on their own. So you know, and then we maybe become overbearing. And you're like, 'No, you can't travel from Ballsbridge⁷ to the city centre by yourself even though you've been through all these different countries.' But I suppose anything that is done, it's done from a safety perspective ... You know, definitely, I know that my young people I generally wouldn't want them to be in the city centre, you know, after, say, 8 o'clock, just with how things are in Dublin or in the city centre. Just how dangerous it is, and I suppose they are such a vulnerable group as well ..."

She gave a particular example of trying to balance care/risk with autonomy/independence during Eid:

"Before Eid, I would have rang my young people just to say, 'You know it's great. You're celebrating with ... your friends. Make sure you stay in groups, but you know, make sure you leave the city centre as well,' just with, you know, just with everything that's going on. Obviously you don't want them to be targeted, or whatever ..."

One professional participant spoke of the rules that were in place due to health and safety regulations and the fact that such rules were sometimes frustrating for the young people in question:

"Yeah, we had one girl, actually. And she was like, 'In my country, I could be married and have kids and ... I was making a fire, like I was making dinner on an open fire, and you're telling me I can't put the oven on.' She was really frustrated, and I was like, 'Do you know

⁷ Ballsbridge is a suburb of Dublin which is approximately 5km from the city centre.

what? You have every right to be frustrated.’ That’s so fair ... Because I don’t want to be married and have kids. But, like, come on, I should be able to boil a pot of water.”

In a similar vein, another participant contrasted a registered residential setting with an SEA and expressed concern about the level of freedom that young people in the SEAs had, with the potential to lead them to engage in illegal activities:

“Most of the emergency offices are in the city or close to the city centre and they can commute to the city centre by bus ... For them, it is like a freedom ... They can roam around the city centre, they can go to different activities ... different people can bring them into drugs ... groups of young people ... I found two or three examples of that ... because of the influence of other kids who came before them and they’re out of care and they will be doing illegal activities in the city centre.”

He felt this differed from the registered residential centres, where he believed rules, key working, and routines helped to “guide” the young people and “develop their behaviour”. Similarly, there was recognition that despite their desire to be independent, many young people needed care:

“Really, I think they had suffered so much that they were willing to be taken care of.”

Where strict rules were enforced in order to protect children, there was recognition of the contrast between these protections and the lack of protections that would be in place when young people turned 18. For example, one of the young people quoted above and another participant pointed to the irony of these kinds of rules, given the lack of support available when the participants turned 18, just a short while later. They felt that strict rules presumably aimed to protect young people were enforced at age 17 while in residential care but that then, upon turning 18, they were left almost to their own devices, with little support (as is discussed in the next chapter). For example, one young person shared her belief that in the process of trying to protect her, staff were curtailing her independence:

“We are responsible for you before the law, so we’re gonna do everything in our power to limit all of your potential dangers, which also leads to limiting of independence and freedom, and our responsibility is to keep you safe physically and legally. And we created this system for everyone, we’re not gonna adjust it for anyone else.”

Her narrative points to her view that the care system lacked an individualistic approach. She continued:

“And, like, really, really often it just felt like because Tusla is legally responsible for me, in those cases where, you know, I wasn’t allowed to, like, leave the house for the first few days, it’s like, they want to put me in this box until I turn 18, and then just throw me out into life without any understanding of who I am or who I want to be. You need to provide a safe space for, like, improving independence and finding what a person wants to do with their life. Not by, you know, fully protecting them with all the curfews and limitations and all the check-ins ... I verbally explained that I was living alone [in my home country]. Independence is really important for me. Personal space is really important for me.”

Another young person expressed similar sentiments. She described a situation where she was not permitted to go on a birthday sleepover at her friend’s house:

“I was two months away from being 18 – a full-grown adult ... They were like, ‘You’re not allowed. No. You’re actually not allowed.’ And I was like, yeah but I saw other people, in the house, going on sleepovers to Dublin. And I was like, why am I not allowed to sleep down the road? How does that make any sense? So, I was like ... two months away from being literally just being booted out the door ... two months away from being sent out to the big bad world. And I’m not allowed to stay the night with a friend?”

The difference between what was provided in the residential care setting and what was provided after children turned 18 was also discussed by professionals who participated, though the focus tended to be more on the practical supports rather than on the themes raised by the young people. For example, one residential care worker referred to everything being provided for young people while in care, and how this contrasted with the aftercare period:

“Age, I suppose, is a massive thing. So like when they’re in a care setting, they have meals cooked for them, obviously supported. Everything is handed to them, toiletries, everything. The minute they’re 18, the next day, they’re moved out the door and they’re expected to be an adult, and they’ve no one cooking for them. They’ve no one even helping them cook or helping them with their clothes, or just guiding them to go to school or go to college.”

The aftercare arrangements will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Young people having a voice

In relation to the professionals who took part, there was evidence of their commitment to young people having their voice heard. Several of the Tusla professionals who took part made reference to “placement visits” and “statutory visits”, within which young people’s views about their care are

sought. One Tusla professional highlighted children's engagement in their care reviews as a rewarding aspect of the work:

"And even just, like, I suppose with participation and the engagement piece, [the young people are], like, at all the meetings, they're at all their child in care reviews. They're very, I suppose, open about their views and in the community [mainstream child welfare and protection services], I think, there's a big push to kind of get children to participate. But here, it's like, they're dying to participate. It's great to get everyone's views and kind of just to be part of the discussion about their plan."

When asked about how children's rights are upheld, one of the residential care staff spoke of the importance of giving children a voice and identified the complaints procedure within that:

"So I suppose giving the child advice. So, firstly, starting off with the key worker and giving them advice, what they want, giving them the complaints procedure, giving them copies of the complaints form, and obviously following the policy with complaints when they submit a complaint ..."

However, the extent to which access to complaints procedures is upheld in SEAs was questioned by one staff member in a residential care setting. While most of the non-Tusla staff who were interviewed appeared to know very little about SEAs, this professional, who worked in an approved residential home, spoke about a young person's experience in an SEA. The young person had lived in an SEA prior to moving into the home in which the professional was now working. The participant outlined how initially the young person did not talk much to staff in the residential setting, but that over time he confided about his previous experience, where he had been warned about the consequences of complaining about his care:

"Throughout his experience in that special emergency [arrangement], he was very much told, 'In Ireland, don't complain. We don't like complainers. You might not get your status if you keep complaining. If you keep complaining about this, then the IPO might say, we'll send you back.' And this is what he'd been told. A trained social care worker wouldn't say that to you, and you know, it's definitely not safe practice or understanding."

The young person was helped by the residential care worker to make a complaint to Tusla. While this resulted in Tusla then apologising to the young person, which the residential worker saw as very important for him, this account raises concerns as to whether separated children's rights are adequately upheld in settings such as SEAs.

While exercising one's right to complain resulted in a positive outcome in some situations, such as the situation outlined above, this was not always the case. One young person exercised her right to complain when an incident occurred at her residential unit, which she did not feel was recorded accurately by staff. She did not feel her complaint was taken seriously:

"I wrote multiple complaints about, like, multiple people writing multiple things about me. And I was like, this is not how it happened. And they wouldn't do anything. But then the people would be like, 'Oh, sure, whatever.' Like, whatever, just shoo her away. But then this specific one [staff member], she decided to take it up to herself to just be like, now we have [a] feud. Now we have [an] ongoing feud that just continued for two years. And that was not fun at all."

While other young people knew that they were allowed to express their views and to complain, they were cautious about doing so. For example, one young person who was not happy in one of her accommodation settings said she knew she had a right to voice this, but was reluctant to do so:

"I had that opportunity and I had that right. The moment I was silent, it was because I didn't have a motivation to speak."

When asked what she meant by not having the motivation to speak, she stated:

"So my social worker, we were really new to each other at that time ... And I was new in this country ... I don't know how, if I complain, will I get something or will I get a new place? I don't want that to happen because I want this place. So I was like, if you speak, you might get disadvantaged."

This points to the young person's sense of powerlessness in the face of difficulties. It points too to the particular situation of separated children. While not specifically stated by this young person, it is likely that some young people may feel fearful of fighting for their rights or of utilising complaints procedures given the precarity of their situations, in particular if their claim for international protection has not yet been upheld. As such, the support of advocates who can facilitate young people to have their views heard and listened to is important.

Access to education

Within the literature, education is identified as important for separated children. This was discussed by young people as well as by professionals. Accessing appropriate educational opportunities and support was identified as a significant issue.

A number of the young people who participated expressed positive experiences of accessing education. For example, one young person who was now in third-level education and talked about joining school in fifth year, described it as a “good experience”:

“I started from fifth year, and then I just did my Leaving Cert here ... Like, I would say it was a good experience, to be honest. It was a good experience, and I would say I did well.”

Similarly, when asked about positive aspects of life in Ireland, school was mentioned by another young person. This young person hadn’t attended school in his country of origin:

“... The good things like since I came to Ireland, yeah, I got to go to school now, get education yeah ... improved my English ... I got to know more people now here, like Irish people as well and people from other nationalities, Brazilian, Portuguese.”

However, challenges were also raised by both young people and professionals. One young person questioned the extent to which those caring for her understood the educational system as it applied to separated children. She was trying to navigate entry into education and had a deadline to meet. She found it frustrating to be cared for by staff who didn’t “know the system”:

“I remember being frustrated, because they also didn’t know, like, much about the system ... like, it wasn’t too bad, it’s just the fact that I had a deadline, and I needed to, like, figure out if I want to stay here ... and they didn’t really understand the system, yeah, and I wasn’t assigned a social worker.”

Professionals spoke about challenges in getting the appropriate education for the young people whom they were supporting. This is consistent with previous research in Ireland, which points to gaps in educational provision for young people of refugee background (Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2019). Young people were arriving at the age typically associated with the later stages of secondary education in Ireland. To begin with, getting an actual school place was difficult:

“And when you’re trying to apply for, like, college courses or school placements ... Like, for one young boy who just moved in in November, it was 32 schools I had to contact before I got him a placement. I got on to the Educational Welfare Officer, and they were just like, ‘Just stretch out your catchment area.’ There was no kind of support from them, you know, to try to contact schools on his behalf to get him a placement. So things like that were quite difficult.”

Similarly, a Tusla social worker referred to emailing 21 schools before she managed to secure a place for a young person and indicated that she was “lucky” in this instance. While attending mainstream

school might be possible for some separated children, for others it was challenging, due to gaps in education or not having sufficient English. Residential staff pointed to these concerns. The same professional quoted above also identified English classes as “quite difficult to get”. She spoke about two young people from Afghanistan whose English was poorer than others in her residential home:

“... Although they’re doing a level 4 course, and that’s supposed to primarily be based on English, they find that they aren’t really learning English, and they’re getting a lot of math homework home that they don’t understand and they want a course primarily in English, and to try to find something like that, that doesn’t cost a huge amount of money, is very difficult.”

A young person expressed similar sentiments, describing the difficulty he had entering school. He had spent some time in Dublin where he attended the City of Dublin ETB Youth and Education Service for Refugees and Migrants, a service that was identified by practitioners as very important. However, this young person then moved to a different part of the country and it was there that he found things difficult as regards schooling. He pointed to the fact that the school was very big compared with what he was used to in his home country. COVID-19-related lockdowns exacerbated his experience also:

“It was kind of very hard, like I never, I never had that. I never had a school like that, you know? ... I never learned [in a] school like, big house like that, so. For my first time, it was kind of hard and I didn’t know how to do it that much. [In my home country] I was in a school, but the school was different, like one room or ... two rooms. I had the language barrier, and there’s a lot of people. So, I became a little bit anxious, you know? ... And sometimes we get lockdowns ...”

This young person’s English was limited and he attended additional language classes. However, he indicated that he didn’t like those classes, describing how he was the youngest attendee, as the others were in their 50s and 60s. As a result, he decided to learn English on YouTube and through subtitles on Netflix:

“I was just teaching myself on YouTube ... And I keep watching, you know, Netflix and subtitles.”

The lack of specific educational services for young people of migrant background outside of Dublin was noted by several professionals as was the need to ensure all such services are sufficiently and sustainably funded.

Another residential care worker expressed the view that it was hard to get “the right educational avenues” for the young people in their care:

“The education piece is quite difficult, like some of our young people here have started level 4 courses that were designed because they were set up specifically for young people from different nationalities. But I suppose there was nearly a one-size-fits-all curriculum developed as part of that. So we had the Ukrainian guys coming back here and they’re saying, you know, we were learning how to change nappies. The other day, there was a social care module on, and they’re like, this is completely irrelevant to us. Other modules, then, were more maths based, but it was maths that they would have done halfway through high school. I suppose getting the right educational avenues for them, it’s been quite difficult.”

In a similar vein as regards finding the appropriate course for the individual young people, one professional working in an NGO raised a concern about an over-reliance on alternative education pathways such as Youthreach:

“And then a big concern for me is access to education. Actually, because, you know so many of the young people speak English, and would like to go and get [the] Leaving Cert,⁸ and that really is not being prioritised, and they are all being funnelled into the Youthreach programmes.”

Another professional expressed similar sentiments and suggested that some young people really wanted to be in mainstream education, not in Youthreach:

“... I’ve supported young people in the past who I’ve got them a place in Youthreach. And I’m like, ‘Isn’t it great? You’re in Youthreach.’ And they’re like, ‘but this isn’t a proper school, like, I want to be in a proper school, like I was before. You know, I want to work hard. I’m going to be a doctor’, or whatever. Not casting shade on Youthreach, I think it’s a brilliant programme.”

Reflecting this view that separated young people often want to pursue mainstream schooling and further education, one young person who had already finished secondary schooling upon arrival in Ireland spoke about feeling dismissed by the attitude of professionals towards her educational ambitions:

“... Everyone was, like, patronising me and dismissing everything I did, and they’re like, ‘Yeah, just relax, you don’t need to get a job, you don’t need to get into university, like, just chill

⁸ The Leaving Certificate is the final examination completed by the majority of second-level students in Ireland. Youthreach is aimed at 16-to-20-year-olds who have left school early. It provides training, work experience, and qualifications (see <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/further-education-and-training/youthreach>).

out.’ Yeah, then what ... happens when I turn 18, do I end up on the streets? ... I felt like it was the attitude, you know, that ‘I know better than you, and you shouldn’t be that interested in studying university.’ Like, what is up with that? If I don’t want to pursue an education, that is a problem. If I want to pursue an education, that is incredibly cool, in my opinion.”

It was also suggested by one professional that young people who were accommodated under Section 5 rather than being taken into care under a care order could be disadvantaged in relation to education. Her understanding was that in such circumstances, young people were less likely to be able to avail of a Tusla-funded assessment of their psychological and educational abilities:

“They’re not entitled to Tusla-funded assessment unless they have a care order ... That would massively guide how to support them and massively guide their education ... their capacity in terms of education when we’re in a mainstream Leaving Cert country.”

Access to mental health services and supports

The need for mental health and psychological supports for separated children was acknowledged in particular by many of the professional participants. Most of the professionals who participated were providing psychosocial support, whether they were in Tusla, in residential care or in NGOs. One young person commented on the mental health support that staff in his residential centre provide. When asked about the support that they provided beyond practical supports, he stated:

“The mental as well. They can support you ... so I do not think they are trained psychologists, but I did know for sure that you were always reminded that you could talk to them in case, for... on any topic you want.”

But the need for more intensive psychological or mental health supports was identified by professionals. In highlighting this vital need, one professional pointed to the particular circumstances of separated children:

“I think every child in care should be getting psychological support, and especially so for children seeking asylum, and even more for children who are here by themselves; and even more for children who are here by themselves, seeking asylum and with no parents, and probably they’ve left their parents in a war-torn country or in a place that isn’t safe for their parents.”

It was noted by most of the professionals that while often needed, these supports were limited in terms of availability. The practitioner cited above highlighted that there was a “lack of resources”.

This was echoed by a Tusla professional who also referenced inadequate resources within services with which she engages:

“Like every other service is just out the door ... like just even medical cards, even to change a GP for a young person, like simple tasks of even, like the medical card, it’s just so challenging. Like, you know, having to get three rejections from GPs, bringing around, then submitting it in, it going on, like a reallocation list within the medical card section. So, it’s just simple tasks or, well, things that used to be simple have now just become such a difficulty that like it’s taking way more of your time as well.”

Another professional pointed to the wider difficulties in accessing health appointments, including but not limited to mental health appointments:

“Also getting a GP. Getting hospital appointments, getting them psychotherapy appointments, getting them psychiatry appointments, everything, all appointments in general [are a challenge].”

Similarly, Tusla professionals highlighted the difficulties in sourcing appropriate mental health supports for separated children and young people. One social worker described this as an area that is “really, really challenging at the moment”. It was indicated that often young people were deemed not to meet the thresholds for mental health support and were placed on waiting lists, leading to a difficult situation for social workers who tried to “manage that and navigate that with the young people”. It was also recognised that there was a lack of expertise in dealing with mental health difficulties among this service user group:

“There’s very few people who are equipped to deal with children or to work with children who’ve experienced, you know, really complex trauma. And I think when it nearly feels like when it gets too difficult ... it’s just put down to PTSD, that’s a really common diagnosis for some of our young people.”

Professionals also pointed to other barriers in young people accessing mental health supports. Stigma and a reluctance to avail of supports were mentioned by two professionals, with both suggesting they need to address these challenges:

“Oftentimes they come from countries that stigmatise mental health, and most of them are working with mental health issues, but because they’re not allowed to think about it, they’re not allowed to normalise it, it becomes difficult to even receive the little supports that’s given to them. So I think we need to normalise it. But they definitely need it. In terms of, are they receiving it? I don’t think so. I do know that in certain circumstances, if the threshold is

quite high, they might get some play therapy, they might get counselling, but it's very, very limited, and I understand it's limited for the whole country ... So if we have a look, if we work with them on an equity, perspective and intersectional point of view, you'll realise that they actually need more support than most children in care, but they don't get it."

Aligned with this, another professional – working in a residential setting – highlighted that often young people are not receptive to supports that are offered and that work needs to be done in relation to this. Her quotation suggests that over time, the young people become more settled and then are more open to supports, pointing, perhaps, to the importance of relationships in this context:

"You know, quite often ... they're not receptive to supports that are being offered. But I think you know, if we go a wee bit deeper than that, you know, when we look at, I suppose their circumstances to date and their experiences to date, what we have found as young people are you know, feeling more secure within their placement ... They're feeling safer. The relationships are being established ... you know. They've been quite open, you know, about maybe the impact that has had on them, and you know the resulting kind of mental health challenges that they're experiencing. And we have, I suppose, a number of young people where they are availing of kind of specialist mental health support, be that in the form of like direct counselling, alternative-type therapies such as like, your meditation, your yoga, things like that ..."

The reluctance of young people to talk about stressful situations they were encountering was also referenced by a number of the young people who took part. One participant made reference to mental health difficulties when asked how she managed a particularly stressful situation that she experienced:

"For me, personally, when I have a problem, I don't like to talk about that problem a lot unless I solve it ..."

Lack of trust may also be an issue impacting willingness to engage with support services. One young person said that he did not talk much about his stress "because you don't know who you really have to trust with your feelings or anything." He outlined why he finds it hard to trust people "nowadays":

"... because anyone can just stab you in the back when they get the chance. I've seen a lot of people like on my way here and if I have to say it, I have to like know the person 100 per cent, have spent time with him for quite a long time and trust him."

Navigating cultural differences and racism

Laird and Tedam (2019) explore the phases that asylum seekers go through in host nations, arguing that the loss of familiar cultural contexts can have a detrimental effect on people seeking asylum and can impact on the length of time it takes for them to settle. The young people alluded to this in various ways, as did professionals. Both sets of participants referenced the navigation of differences in culture – particularly as regards language, religion and behaviour – and the challenges that these differences posed for young people and professionals alike. They spoke too about positive aspects of cultural differences. In addition, and aligned with culture, participants spoke about racism in Irish society and in particular about anti-refugee sentiment.

Young people and professionals alike referred to the diversity among separated children seeking international protection. Some of the young people talked about their periods in Tusla care as a time when they met and interacted with people from a range of backgrounds. For example, a young person said that she met “a lot of people, different people from different cultures.” She referred to this as “interesting”.

Professionals too pointed to the diverse backgrounds of the young people with whom they were working. One residential care professional identified the diverse nationalities of the young people with whom their service was working, including young people from Afghanistan, Somalia, South Africa and Pakistan. While the diversity posed challenges, as will be discussed below, it was also discussed in a positive light. For example, one Tusla professional pointed to the diversity of the young people as one of the most rewarding aspects of the work with separated children:

“... The opportunity to build relationships with different nationalities, I just find it so rewarding. And just from a professional point of view of learning about so many different cultures – from Afghanistan to Somalia and now to Ukraine, just that varied experience ...”

Language differences posed challenges for young people and professionals alike. Often it was necessary to use interpreters and this, in itself, posed difficulties. For example, the young person (cited previously) who spoke about there being queries about his age upon arrival, indicated that there were communication difficulties with the interpreter who was assigned to him. The interpreter came from a different cultural background and their accent was different. To compound this, interpreting took place by phone and not in person. The young person concluded as follows:

“... It was a bit hard and the interpreter was not an Afghan, she was a Pakistani but the same language, but we had a barrier with the accent.”

Professionals reported challenges with regards to language barriers not only between them and the young people but also amongst the young people themselves, when they are living together but don't speak the same language. One participant, who worked in a residential centre, stated:

"Yeah, definitely like, there's challenges that come in play with it all. Even the young people's interactions with each other because they might not have translation [when they are] together but they are trying to communicate with each other in total different languages: not to flush the toilet, for example, or have different morals in terms of hygiene, and because of their religion and when they're trying to communicate this to a person, in their language, it's instantly taken as aggression and [the other person] doesn't understand, 'Why are you coming at me for it?' ... They [the young people] are trying their best to translate back and explain. And ... we don't know what's going on, but we just know these two are not getting along right now."

Her description points to the complexity of young people from different backgrounds living together and the complex work for the professionals involved. Such circumstances necessitated calls with two different interpreters to try to figure out what was going on and to try to resolve the situation. Sometimes a "meeting with two boys that need two different translators, Arabic and Pashto" might be needed. The same professional talked about having access to interpreters (via phone) 24 hours a day but that sometimes that interpreter is not the right fit for the young person. She described a particular young person with whom she had worked:

"One thing in translation calls that I found that was definitely challenging was that there's different dialects of Arabic. When we used translation calls, we realised how heightened he would get on the translation call. Well, we later realised that the translator was of a different dialect, and that he was actually correcting the young person as opposed to translating for him."

Differences in relation to different aspects of behaviour were also identified. For example, a young person talked about the differences between her Eastern European culture and Irish culture. She singled out "small talk" as something she found difficult:

"... The small talk thing ... I [expletive] hate it ... Respectfully. And in Eastern Europe, people often judge Eastern Europeans as being rude or, like, way too direct, but it's because honesty and genuineness is, like, the primary value, pretty much, in communication. Like, I literally say everything that comes to my mind. While Irish people, to me, respectfully, again ... seem extremely hypocritical. Very two-faced."

She went on to explain that she found it hard to “read” Irish people:

“I cannot read Irish people in their personal relationships. I cannot understand what they want from me. Sometimes I would have an amazing time with an Irish person, and then I would expect that we would hang out again, and then they would act as if they don’t know me.”

Regarding “small talk”, a residential care worker also spoke about noticing this difference between Irish and Ukrainian culture. She spoke about working with a young person who wanted to be a barber and how he had not been successful at interview:

“What we have now is, actually we, a young person here who’s trying to become a barber, and he’s done ... a number of interviews. But one area that he’s fallen down is actually his interpersonal skills. So, like to be a barber, you kind of have to do [small talk] to a certain extent. You need to know when you need to park it if somebody’s not in the mood, obviously. But like this fellow will go in and say, ‘your hair is strange. I don’t like your current hairstyle, that you’re going bald.’ You know what I mean? We’re like, ‘rein it in, there.’”

Another young person expressed cultural differences in the way she responded to people in authority. She tended to fold her arms when her teacher was speaking to her and she felt that was considered rude. She added that when she is angry, she would pace and that again, this was interpreted as rude. She stated:

“... When I am mad, what I do is walk around, and they find it difficult. I mean, rude. They found that rude too.”

Another young person identified alcohol as one of the differences between Ireland and his country of origin:

“Here, like, you have to have fun, you have to drink. But there, you don’t need to drink. People don’t drink. They have no alcohol there.”

Religious differences were highlighted by some of the young people. One Muslim female highlighted how familiarity and shared cultural markers play a crucial role in shaping an individual’s confidence and sense of security in different societal contexts:

“... Back in Africa, you have the confidence because the next person to you is wearing a hijab.”

This quote highlights the profound sense of belonging and cultural security that comes with being in an environment where one’s identity is widely represented and where one’s religious expression is

not an anomaly but rather a common and respected practice. The contrast implied here is that outside Africa, particularly in Western or non-Muslim-majority countries, and in this case Ireland, “wearing a hijab” may invite scrutiny, discrimination, or a sense of isolation.

Professionals spoke about trying to ensure that the young people are supported to practise their culture, if they wish to do so:

“They would, definitely in the centres, [get opportunities to practise their culture] you know, ... they’re supported. And going to the mosque, like Friday prayers are a big thing. I suppose you’re trying to balance that with school and school attendance, and some young people are like, ‘No, it’s grand, you know, I’ll pray when I get back’, or you know, pray at home. And then other young people are like, you know, ‘No, I have to go to Friday prayers.’ And, so that’s always a hard one.”

The same professional described how she managed this dilemma in relation to one young person:

“I have a young person at the moment, and his school attendance was like really poor. Anyways, and then he wanted to go to the mosque, you know he’d happily get up and go to the mosque, so ... I don’t know if this is ethical but ... we balanced it, so I was like, ‘All right. If you go to school Monday to Thursday’ ... It did [work]. Yeah. But then it regressed during Ramadan, as it would, because he was so tired. Bless him!”

The extent to which the young people practised their religion, if they had one, varied. One young person explained that she was not currently practising Islam. She believed this was a barrier to forming relationships with other young people where she was living. When asked if other young people in a similar situation were a source of support, she stated:

“It wasn’t really for me because as you can see ... ,... there was a big barrier, there was like a big religious barrier. So I am Muslim but then I don’t really ... I’m not ... [practising]. Yeah so that was a big barrier.”

In relation to any experiences of racism, young people responded variably. One young person described the treatment of a young boy by staff in her accommodation centre as belittling:

“There would be different levels of English in the house. And I noticed it, I felt like I was being like, belittled. But my God. There was this one boy ... He couldn’t speak English. But like obviously you could see that he’s just like, just a regular ... person ... And the way they were treating him. Like, I am saying that, I was like feeling belittled. He was full-on being treated

like an infant. And it wasn't even in the way, like oh, the language barrier. They just assumed that just because he cannot speak English ... that he lacks capacity, to like get basic things."

She indicated that all of the staff were white Irish and that she felt that they needed some kind of "sensitivity training". When asked if she felt this was to do with race, she stated:

"Probably. Definitely. Like they were told. Oh you're gonna be taking care of ... Whatever. Whatever. Whatever. And they just expected, 'Oh, well. We're gonna be re-civilising people.' ... That's basically, I'm just assuming that's what went on in their heads. That is literally what I just assumed. That's what went on in their heads. Because you could see it, the way they're talking to you."

This experience potentially points to the lack of training and professional qualifications of some staff working in centres for separated children and the vital need for anti-racism training.

One young person, who did not himself experience racism, commented on the broader picture in Dublin at the time. He appeared to be referencing the Dublin riots which happened in November 2023, although the girl in question had been severely injured rather than killed. He stated:

"There were two times, when somebody killed the young girl in Dublin and there were demonstrations and there were burned buses and all of that. I remember I was a bit scared, but I knew that this wouldn't last for long. It will end up in probably a few days. Nothing really changed after that. So, no, I didn't face any of this."

A Tusla social worker also referred to their team's response after the riots:

"Even with the riots last year ... Was it last year, the year before? You know, I would have had to ring all of them, and I think we did this as a team anyways, we were on groups, you know, checking in on the young people, making sure they were home, and you know, just even checking in after ... Some of them were petrified and some of them really scared to come back into Dublin."

Tusla professionals also highlighted the changed atmosphere in Ireland as regards migrant communities and its impact on young people. They drew attention to the "narratives" to which the young people were exposed. One Tusla participant indicated that a young person had recently asked her if she thought he was in Ireland "to steal [her] land". Another Tusla participant referred to a rural part of Ireland in which he indicated there were a lot of IPAS centres and where young people had been subjected to racism:

“... There’s a lot of different migrants up there and you can see a negative connotation happening with some of the young people, that isn’t great. Like sort of racial, some racial slurs in schools, there’s been fights, there’s been bullying. And then even, like, a neighbour who lives beside a centre, something, like a ball, went into the yard and it was madness. So it was just blown out of proportion and that kind of gets seeped into the community, which is difficult.”

This person’s colleague also referenced what she described as an “unsettling kind of atmosphere” in an Intreo⁹ office:

“I was going to a social welfare office, like an Intreo office down on [name of street in Dublin] and I actually felt I needed to take off my Tusla badge because I was going in with a young person and I could see there were looks and there were eyes of being with this young person – from Somalia, you know, and I actually did feel uncomfortable in the space ... there was just an unsettling kind of atmosphere.”

One residential care worker suggested that, from her personal and professional experience, that certain groups experienced more racism and anti-refugee sentiment than others, and suggested that young people from Ukraine “get on okay for the most part” in that regard but that “the other nationalities struggle a little bit more”. She gave an example of young people from Ukraine travelling by bus with a staff member, who was not white:

“So we actually had an incident here recently, where two of the young lads were on public transport with a staff member and somebody behind them piped up, ‘Where are you guys from?’ And they said, ‘We’re from Ukraine’. And he said to them, ‘Oh, you guys are fine. I’ve no issues with you here.’ But he gestured towards somebody sitting in front of them and said, ‘Those people are the ones I’ve issues with, who come in here and take everything.’ They were actually gesturing towards a staff member. He was of a different nationality ... They probably didn’t even know where he was from themselves.”

Overall, differences in culture posed some challenges for young people and for professionals, perhaps particularly in the realm of relationships, where communication difficulties and different behavioural norms can perhaps make it more difficult to establish and maintain relationships. In addition, the rise of anti-refugee sentiment and racism was also influential.

⁹ Intreo is the Irish Public Employment Service, providing a single point of contact for supports and services related to employment and income.

Family

Support and contact

One thing that all of the young people had in common was that they were separated from parents/guardians. As has been highlighted in other research (e.g. Johansen and Tørrisplass, 2024), it was recognised that many of the young people missed their family members. One professional succinctly stated:

“They’re missing their parents. They’re missing home.”

One young person, who had experienced racist comments from someone he knew, expressed the view that during times like that, he wished he was not separated from his family:

“Like, some days you feel you should be with your family ... When it gets like ... the life here, like, the time with me and [name of person] and the racist stuff, I feel like if I was at home, I wouldn’t feel like that inside, you know, inside me. So, nobody’s going to say to me words like that, you know, like ... racist things to you, like ... I wouldn’t feel different. So, like, at that, sometimes you feel, like, what if I’ve been like, home? It wasn’t going to happen. It will not happen, this or that.”

The extent to which the young people had contact with family varied. Some of the young people spoke about being in touch with family members, and it was evident that professionals made efforts to ensure contact occurred, where possible. One young person talked about the internet being used in his residential centre in order to stay in touch with family and how doing so was encouraged by staff and social workers:

“There was full-time access to the internet. So, you were definitely able to talk to your parents or whoever. And they were very often doing so ... the guys, the other young people. Yeah. They were able to access it, but there’s no problems at all. Yeah. Without encountering any issues ... It was encouraged as well ... Oh, actually, the social workers that are assigned ... would encourage that as well.”

Similarly, a residential care worker talked about supporting young people to be able to contact their families:

“Like not all, but some have contact with home ... when they come into care, Tusla provides them with a mobile phone, which is fantastic and then like when they move in with us, then we kind of help them to save their money and get a better phone. You know that they have a

little bit of pride in – like an iPhone, maybe, or a Samsung, or you know, something that they can video call on and stuff like that.”

However, for separated children, contact with family can be complicated – both in terms of having the contact and the nature of that contact. For some young people, contact may not be desirable, particularly if their reasons for flight were related to family. Where contact was desired, it was not always the case that contact was possible or consistent. One residential care worker identified lack of contact or difficulty contacting family members as a key challenge:

“There’s a lot of young people that come over that do have contact with their family, but the contact is very sporadic ... There was one young person, for two or three weeks this young person contacted [their family] daily. And then, whatever happened in Afghanistan, there was no signal, and this and that ... he essentially expected his mom to be dead ... That’s a huge challenge. And that’s back to that piece of having that awareness and that trauma-informed practice and being aware of what is going on ... But I think that’s a challenge in its own right, how sporadic the contact can be. And then trying to support that, and being so culturally aware.”

The same participant also cited another example:

“Like we had a young person come to us from Somalia, who was with us over a year, had no contact with family, was afraid to start that process, again due to trust issues. So we tried to ... and we’d all had a great relationship with this young person. But when we mentioned the Red Cross [Restoring Family Links service], there was such a fear of starting that process, and the danger that could put his family in. Simply down to the Al-Shabaab. So, I think that is unique. Not even a professional challenge, but a challenge specific to these separated children is they’re so afraid to start the process of trying to contact the family that sometimes they just won’t, because it’s almost easier.”

Some young people who were interviewed were able to access support from their families via the contact that they had. When discussing what helps when things are difficult, one young person stated:

“When things are difficult, my family, my friends, and my guardian helps me. They’re the closest people to me.”

However, the findings also suggest that young people were often careful not to burden their families with their difficulties, as they did not want them to worry. For example, when asked if she talks to her family about problems she faces, one young person said:

“There’s no ... benefit because you will worry that they will worry, they won’t give you any solution because they’re far. They’re far away from you. So, I don’t. I don’t talk to my mother. Unless I’m happy.”

Another young person expressed similar sentiments:

“I still keep it to myself because I don’t want to make them worry about anything anyway because they’re far away.”

However, another young person, who indicated that he didn’t usually call his parents for support, spoke about an occasion where he did. He indicated that he was really desperate in his search for accommodation, so he eventually reached out to his father, who was able to help from a distance:

“Because I just don’t know what to do ... and so in 15 minutes, my dad went on a Facebook page. He found the number and he called it and accommodation was sorted out.”

Contact with family members was sometimes a source of stress for young people. Professionals recounted several reasons for this, including family wanting young people to send money to them, pressure from family to be recognised as under 18 due to the family reunification that would ensue, and pressure to secure refugee status. One professional stated:

“Some have contact with home and there’s a lot of pressure from families that want them to provide money. So they’re like, you know, some parents would [say] like, ‘Why are you going to school? Get a job. Money. We’re struggling here.’ ... Other families are like, you know, ‘We’re glad you’re safe, and you’re there for a better life.’”

Tusla professionals also highlighted the fact that the experience of contact with family can vary. One professional referred to the fact that while contact can be stressful, particularly as regards family reunification, it can also serve as a useful resource for social workers, suggesting the importance of collaboration between parents and social workers:

“... On the plus side, contact is good, I suppose, you know, if we have a young person, maybe ... they’re not engaged in education that much. And we’re like, ‘Right, we’re going to have a call with, you know, with your mom and dad.’ And you know, all of a sudden, their attendance is 100 per cent, you know, because they obviously don’t want their parents to know, but you are also doing it in a way that it doesn’t look like you’re going off and ratting them out, but you are using them as a resource.”

Family reunification

In keeping with the international literature, the findings suggest that reunification with family is very important to separated children living in Ireland. Indeed, when asked about hopes for the future, one young person, who had already applied for family reunification, described her hope as follows:

“To be with my family, absolutely ... Yeah. To be in one place.”

She had been going through the family reunification for a year-and-a-half and described herself as “excited” about the prospect of her mother and younger siblings joining her.

While the “goal” of family reunification is likely to be in the forefront of young people’s minds, our research findings suggest that this goal can serve as a source of stress in several different ways, with this stress being evident over time. The international protection process itself can have additional pressure attached to it because not being successful will mean being reunited with family will be next to impossible to achieve. However, when international protection status is secured, the stress continues as young people begin to engage with family reunification application procedures. Previous research suggests that the bureaucracy involved, along with the restrictive entitlements in place, and the financial costs associated with the process all serve as sources of stress (Smith et al., 2020).

One professional drew attention to the complexity of the family reunification process and the challenges young people experience in understanding it:

“What I’ve noticed that like it is ... it’s still hard for young people to kind of understand the process of what’s going on. And maybe this comes down to the solicitor they have. And the relationship they have with that solicitor. But yeah, I’m just thinking of one young person ... who’s going through [family reunification] at the moment, and he’s really struggling to kind of understand why it’s taking so long, and what’s going on. And is his family going to come? And you know just all of the stuff that goes along with it.”

Professionals also spoke about the fact that some young people experienced pressure from home as regards family reunification:

“Because if the young people get their status then ... they have family reunification. They can bring their family over on the visa ... Some [families] are ... very clued in, and others are not, even like the young people don’t even realise that [family reunification] is something until I have explained it to them. And then when they ... explain it ... to their moms, their moms are like, ‘Don’t worry about us.’ You know, very much a mommy saying, ‘Don’t be worrying ...

We'll figure ourselves out. I'm pleased that you're safe.' You know, and then others are like ... that the whole family are going to be there, then '19 of us are coming on the visa'. You know, ringing every day, saying, 'When are you getting your visa?'

Similarly, a Tusla professional referred to the stress that young people experience and the pressure they can feel in relation to family reunification. She highlighted the role of Tusla staff and solicitors in liaising with families to try to manage expectations:

"A lot of it is trying to manage the young person's expectations, but also the family's expectations of how you know how long the process is ... And then, you know, you would have some families that are, you know, that understand ... And they're like, 'Yeah, we understand. It's a process.' And then there's some families, you know, who think that it's going to happen within the next 3–4 weeks, and you know, and that's so much pressure to put on a young person, and then that starts to affect them with school. You know their diet, their own mental health starts to deteriorate. So it's really hard and often what we do is we would offer to maybe contact the family and explain that to them. Just so that takes the pressure away from the young person, that you know they might find it a bit, you know. They might understand a bit more if it's coming from us or the solicitor."

The stress associated with family reunification often continued following the arrival of family members, when, reflecting Smith et al. (2025), young people became de facto resettlement workers for their families, many of whom entered homeless services upon arrival. This was spoken about by several professionals who participated, including an NGO worker who stated:

"And then the other thing, which I'm sure you're aware of ... and it's been an ongoing thing is when families do come, just all of the issues that come up. With that it's particularly around housing and homelessness, and families going into homeless hubs; separated children – previous separated children who now find themselves in the position of being the head, lead provider and carer of their whole families, looking for school places for their younger siblings, you know."

Similarly, a Tusla social worker highlighted the stresses of this stage, drawing attention in particular to the financial implications for young people, as regards travel and accommodation following arrival:

"Again. Very stressful. Very stressful, I suppose, for the young person as well. They have to fund their travel to Ireland ... trying to come up with, you know, money to buy tickets for six, seven, eight family members. And then, obviously, once they get here, then the housing,

that's a big part. So I know at the moment, young people are being encouraged to save some money. Just so they have money to put aside for an Airbnb for a couple of nights before the families can even be processed by the council or put into emergency accommodation."

It was the view of participants from the Tusla team for SCSIP that supporting young people in the aftermath of family reunification was not really within their remit but that they did this work because nobody else was doing it. It was noted that there was a "massive amount of work" involved. Having identified need in this area, Tusla appointed a family support worker to work with families who were reunified. One Tusla practitioner expressed frustration in relation to this:

"I just get slightly frustrated that, you know, everything that's landed, you know, with kind of Tusla, like family reunification. They're entitled to have their family here and they turn 18. There has to be support for these families and these young people. And at the moment, you know, Tusla take on that, you know, the team here take on that – to support the young people and their families. This is after they turned 18, supporting the families, doing the integration piece, getting the children into school, getting them access to medical cards, going through the process with the young people, you know, and obviously there's some brilliant legal firms and the KIND Project is set up, and it's incredible. There's such a lot of goodwill. But actually, it should not come down to goodwill."

She called for "a structure" to be put in place, at an interdepartmental level, to ensure "joined up thinking around responsibility and supports". Her recognition for the need for supports in this area – not only for separated children and young people – but also for other cohorts, reflects findings in previous research on family reunification in Ireland (Smith et al., 2020).

As noted earlier in the discussion about age disputes, not being recognised as a child upon arrival had a significant impact on family reunification entitlements, and thus such decisions had the potential to have a profound impact on young people and on their family members. The same was true when a young person was not granted subsidiary protection or refugee status or indeed when a young person realised that some members of their family would not be entitled to join them, because of the policies in place. One professional drew attention to the stress involved in this:

"And then I think there's also a piece around those young people who aren't entitled to family reunification. So whether they were age-disputed and deemed adult, or maybe their family ... maybe they're like, their siblings don't qualify ... that can also be a really hard and stressful situation to be in. You're having to say to your family that they can't join you. And there's nothing you can do about that."

Professionals also drew attention to the need for the family reunification system and process to improve. It was indicated that suggestions for improvements had been made but that many of these had not yet come on stream.

“Yeah, obviously, there are long delays, lots of difficulties with documents ... And we have been trying to engage with the family reunification unit around improvements, and we met them last summer and prepared a document on all the improvements that could be made to the family reunification process generally. Many of which they said they would take on, like making it an online form and speeding up the process in that way. And you know, replying to emails every now and then, but we still haven’t really seen many of those improvements put in place, although some applications have been sped up. Now, for example, our office made an application just during the summer, and that’s already been approved. So there’s real variation in the length of time that things can take off. And I suppose there continues to be an over-reliance on DNA testing as well, where it’s not really necessary when relationship and identity have already been established through documents.”

Other sources of support

In keeping with previous research, in Ireland and elsewhere, which highlights the significance of peer support for separated children (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010; Oppedal and Idsoe, 2015; Omland and Andenas, 2020), young people who participated in this study pointed to the importance of their peers. For example, one young person talked about the benefits of living with others of the same nationality as him, pointing to both continuity of culture and loyalty:

“It’s like they know the culture, you know the culture, the same language, the food they cook or you cook, it’s the same thing, and the best thing is like if you get some trouble, they are there for you ... like the people in Europe, they don’t have that loyalty, okay, to be honest.”

In the Irish context, separated children who are in residential care are almost always placed in centres that cater exclusively for separated children. Usually these centres cater for young people from different countries, though in recent years sometimes there are centres for a specific nationality (e.g. centres for Ukrainian young people). In keeping with the international literature, being in the company of other young people who have also migrated alone, can be a source of support.

One young person said that she was really “lonely” when she was in foster care and welcomed a placement with other young people, some of her own nationality. She referenced the knowledge and

support that could be gleaned from other young people and from staff, and the “fun and entertainment” of living in a residential setting:

“We were three Afghans and three Somali ... You were able to connect [with] other people. Also, you will know more things, for example, the opportunities. Yeah. If you’re at that place [foster home] I couldn’t know anything. For example, if at that time I want to work, but I don’t know. I don’t have anybody to ask. At this place, I have the people. I have the staff. I have so many people ... mentally, it’s very good ... it will give you fun and entertainment. I don’t know, but I prefer to stay around people rather than to stay alone.”

Social care professionals also spoke about young people living together or in close proximity to one another. One residential care worker pointed to the support provided by others of the same nationality:

“So even we have two or three houses within our setting here and there are different companies running them. But you’ll all see Ukrainians go to Ukrainians, Somalis going to Somalis, and it’s just lovely to see that they see someone else in the community that they can just walk across the road and walk out the door. So I do think that’s a positive, there’s a bigger community of them that they’re not feeling isolated and on their own, you know.”

When asked about the rewarding aspects of the work, a Tusla professional referenced the young people within residential settings becoming close to one another, thus again highlighting the importance of peer support:

“And also I can see the different nationalities of the children mixing as well. I think people that they would never have mixed with before and then become very close ... In the residential. It’s lovely to see. People maybe that they wouldn’t have thought that they would mix with or people that they ... would never have the opportunity to live with or be friends with and then seeing that happen. It’s lovely to see.”

A colleague also highlighted this point, emphasising that young people meet not only in their residential settings but also in other settings, such as the mosque. She highlighted the importance of young people remaining connected to their cultural background:

“And there’s a balance between trying to obviously integrate them to our society, but also promoting where they can, that, you know, they obviously remain connected to their own kind of identity and culture, as well. And then the peer support is a big thing, and they all end up meeting each other some one way or another, and you know, and that’s a huge thing for them as well. I have one lad, and he was in a house. They were all different nationalities.

But then he's made friends with another young person in a different centre, and they're from the same country. And so they've made friends, and you know they've become quite close. So those peer relationships."

Peers from the same country were also helpful in terms of language support. One residential care worker referred to this:

"But we would use the help of the other young people for your day to day ... If they're hungry, if they want something, if they need something ... And if there's two people from Afghanistan speaking the same language, [it] can be helpful. Peer support."

One young person spoke about the support that Irish children in his class in school gave him when he was struggling with schooling:

"It was easy to make friends. I met my best friend ... So, yeah, it was very easy. And the Irish kids was just nice. And sometimes, like, when I did not know what, they tried to explain it to me."

Another young person spoke about meeting people via an online app. He described how he had interacted with many people in his residential home but was connected with them now. The app allowed him to connect with people from his country:

"There was many people which I interacted [with] in [name of residential home]. But I just happened to not interact with them now because I'm out of [there] and I just happened not to create a connection with them. There is a service and there is a thing online where you can meet people. There's an app which I use personally to interact with people. I have met some by now. So because the main audience is Ukrainian and Russian, you can find somebody to meet with. So what it does is it shows you people in the same location where you are. So you can go to wherever ... Madagascar or India ... and you can meet with Ukrainian people. It's just some, it's just some app which everybody uses."

Several of the non-residential care professionals who took part offered support to young people, both those who were in care and young people who had aged out of the care system or were undergoing age disputes. A number of them met young people during the course of the work they did in adult accommodation centres, while others worked in NGOs that supported separated children and young people. Support was obtained by young people from these professionals. These professionals also referred to relationships that were formed with others in the international protection system: while they expressed concern about the lack of support and potential risks of young people living in adult IPAS accommodation, they also identified situations where they saw

adults in IPAS accommodation centres looking out for young people – either those who had “aged out” and moved there, or those who had been “deemed adult” but who seemed quite young. One professional stated:

“Some of the luckier ones end up in their adult accommodation and befriending or getting close to someone who’s a little bit older, sometimes maybe just like an 18- or 19-year-old, and that person can become supportive and kind of show them around. Not ideal for an 18- or 19-year-old to be doing that either, but, you know, it’s there. Yeah, it can be kind of lucky where you end up and who you meet.”

A professional in a residential centre also referred to support from others who had “come through the system”:

“Like some of these kids come over here. And ... they know other people that come through the system, and they can make connections, whereas some don’t.”

There was recognition too that while support from people with similar experiences was beneficial, that it was important too that they did not become burdened:

“So yeah, positive, consistent mentorship, community, I think, is really important. Having peers and friends that get what they’re going through ... That peer, someone who’s just a little bit older ... But at the same time, you don’t want to be putting extra pressure on young people who are going through their own stuff to be having to be the ones to then go and support someone else.”

Given the multiple challenges that separated children face, including as international protection applicants and as young people in care, ensuring that they had a chance to just be young people was identified by several participants. One youth worker talked about giving young people a space to “connect with peers”:

“You know, a big thing that impacts on young people is just having space to be young, having space to connect with peers; having a space where they feel like they belong, and where they can build community and feel like they’re among people who understand what they’re going through and what they’ve been through. I think that is all really important.”

Similarly, another professional referred to the fact that the young people with whom she works have to take on a lot of responsibility that it was important to give them space to “just be young people”:

“They don’t get a space to just be young people. That’s half my job is making sure they get a space where [they] can come and just have fun and make friends and build community,

because that community is like ... it's really isolating to be on your own ... Just no one there to look out for them, really. And like the only people that get to look out for them are people who are very stretched, and there to give them, you know, some legal advice or housing advice, something like that, but no care or mentorship. They try. They'll do their best. But there's just not that capacity to give them all of the time."

Similar sentiments were also expressed by a young person when he was asked about positive aspects of life in Ireland. He talked about being "a normal kid":

"I was, like, I was going to school, I was just living as a normal kid, like. So I had a place to stay. I was just going, I was playing football, I was going to club, I was going to school. I just, I was having a good life. I was just like a normal kid."

Schools were also identified as sources of support. One young person spoke about his school finding a host family for him after he turned 18 and was struggling to complete his Leaving Cert while placed in a hotel. Another spoke of school staff intervening when he and his peers had not been given a clothing allowance:

"So we were like there for a while, we didn't have new clothes or anything and one of the lads there he was going to school and I think the teacher figured out something, that he's coming every day in the same clothes, he's not changing it, so then she asked him and he told her what the story was. Then they emailed the department, Tusla, and then Tusla asked the staff to take us to the shops ..."

In keeping with previous literature in Ireland and elsewhere (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011), prayer and religion were also mentioned as sources of support. For example, one young person indicated that he found solace in reading the Quran:

"It helps in lots of things, like if I'm really depressed or anything, it really helps me. I pray or read the Quran so it really helps me calm down."

The role of people who advocated for separated children was also identified as important. Reference was made to YAP (Youth Advocate Programmes Ireland) and to EPIC as well as to guardians ad litem. One NGO participant highlighted the important role of advocates:

"And I'm not saying this because EPIC is commissioning this. But I do think the EPIC advocacy service is a really important support. I have referred a number of young people, like over 18 now, but would have been separated children in care previously. I've referred a number of people in to advocates, and like kind of not so much in Dublin. Actually, it's normally like

around the country. And I've just been really, really impressed by the advocate who has, you know, taken that referral and stepped in and driven up the country to go and meet this young person. Get them off the street, you know, help them find housing, help them get into education like. I really rate that service. I think it's brilliant."

Conclusion

It is evident from the findings presented in this chapter that the views of the young people who participated differed as regard the care and support that was provided to them. Their narratives suggest both the different services available to individual young people and the different levels of need that young people may present. Young people spoke about many positive aspects of their interactions with Tusla and with staff in accommodation settings but also referred to challenges encountered. It was evident that Tusla professionals were under considerable pressure as a result of the increased numbers and that for their part, some staff in accommodation centres were coming to grips with a new area of work for them, involving considerable complexity. Young people faced difficulties accessing the right mental health and educational supports and services and encountered challenges too as regards cultural differences and racism, with the rise in anti-refugee sentiment noted by many participants. As regards family, the narratives of both young people who participated and professionals suggest that many separated children have contact with family members and a strong desire for family reunification but that, regarding the latter, there are considerable levels of stress involved, combined with a lack of support.

Chapter 7: Findings 3: Turning 18, aftercare and the future

Introduction

As is evident from the literature review, research evidence suggests that the period of time immediately following care is of particular importance for young people. Increasingly, attention is paid to the transition between care and aftercare and the vital need for ongoing supports after young people turn 18 and leave care. For separated young people, the same applies. Previous research points to the challenges that are often encountered, particularly for young people who turn 18 without having secured a form of status (Ní Raghallaigh and Thornton, 2017). The data from this study concurs with this evidence and indeed suggest that circumstances are now even more challenging for young people when they turn 18 because of the broader accommodation and support issues facing international protection applicants in Ireland. This chapter will discuss the findings in relation to turning 18 and aftercare, beginning with a discussion of entitlement to aftercare support and how aftercare arrangements impact children even before their 18th birthday. In addition, this chapter will include a section on training needs of those working with separated children.

Entitlement to aftercare support

The entitlement to aftercare support after turning 18 was dependent on the length of time a young person had spent in care before reaching adulthood: under Tusla's policies, there is no entitlement to aftercare support if a young person has not been in care for at least one year. As many separated young people are received into care while 17, they do not meet this threshold. One professional referred to this as "disproportionately unfair". One young person referred to the implications of this situation. Upon turning 18, he was provided with help from Tusla to move to a centre for people from Ukraine where he would get food and accommodation but needed to pay €300 per month. However, he had difficulty sourcing the funds to cover those costs, as he was not entitled to the aftercare allowance, and the fact that he was still in school posed challenges in securing allowances that other Ukrainian adults received:

"I was desperate for some kind of payment because I wasn't able to pay for my stay in the hotel. And I was trying to access the Tusla payments, but it happened so that you can only access Tusla payments when you have stayed over 12 months. And I've spent just 11 months. Yeah. And so this was another trouble."

The nature of the aftercare support is also impacted by whether the young person has secured their status. Regardless of the length of time in care, Tusla generally does not provide aftercare accommodation or financial support to young people who remain in the international protection process after turning 18, as they are then treated as adult international protection applicants and become the responsibility of the Department of Justice and the Department of Social Protection. Tusla participants explained that while those who have been in care for 12 months are entitled to support from an aftercare worker (either via the duty aftercare system or through an allocated worker), they are not entitled to the aftercare allowance and their accommodation becomes the responsibility of IPAS. The implications of being provided with IPAS accommodation are discussed further below.

While those who had secured their international protection status did not have to worry about entering IPAS accommodation, they were instead faced with attempting to secure private rented accommodation, something which was extremely difficult in the context of Ireland's housing crisis. One professional drew attention to the inadequacy of the aftercare allowance, suggesting that Ireland was failing separated children leaving care:

“But the last – I’m trying to think – the last three people that have left us have gone into private rented accommodation. There’s no lodgings. There’s no foster placement and ... so they’re very reliant on that aftercare allowance ... €300 a week or €1,300 a month, but €800 of that could be paying for their room. So, I actually feel like there’s a bit of a failing going on in the system that they come into this country, we meet all of their needs, and then we just can’t. It’s like, up until 18, the supports are there, and once they hit 18 ... I actually think the state is massively failing.”

A young person who participated expressed similar sentiments. He talked about the transition to aftercare being “a bit fast”, stating:

“... Immediately all the supports you were adapted to were cancelled. Well, naturally, because you’re 18 now.”

Another young person who participated indicated that he was allocated an aftercare worker when he turned 18 but when asked about his experience with this person he said, “nothing, nothing”. He indicated that the aftercare worker had done a few things for him but also said “sometimes I think she forgets me.”

Another young person talked about struggling to establish a relationship with her aftercare worker, having had a good relationship with her social worker. She was critical of her aftercare worker

because she said she would help her find new accommodation and the young person believed that this would be the case, but then she did not help:

“And most social or aftercare, they do that. They do that. They ask you to find a place by yourself or they will tell you that they’re going to find for you. But then they will tell you that you have to find for yourself ... So I was depending on myself, but I couldn’t find it.”

This young person then had to move to a homeless hostel, which the aftercare worker did help her with. While there, she met another aftercare worker and established a better relationship with this person:

“And I explained my situation and he listened to me. That’s what matters for me.”

This young person felt a sense of unfairness and that different young people were dealt with differently:

“Yeah, they’re not fair. So they’re not fair. Some of them, they’re not. They don’t deal [with some people] the same way they deal with other people. Because some young people, when they turn 18, they find a place, some they don’t.”

Another young person who, as referenced previously, talked about “hating” her social worker, had a more positive experience with an aftercare worker, describing her as an “angel”:

“And during the summer, in like August and September, I was contacted by [name of person] who was supposed to be my aftercare worker. Again, another angel in my life in Ireland. Absolutely love her again. And I wasn’t even supposed to be her responsibility before I turned 18, but she like became my kind of like social worker.”

Tusla staff who were interviewed recognised the gap in provision for young people who had not spent a year in care and were not entitled to aftercare supports. One participant described how the SCSIP team responded to this need by developing a new position to “support that cohort of young people that have their status but don’t have entitlement to aftercare”:

“So, to support them in, you know, moving, finding alternative accommodation ... I think probably what was happening was you could see that there was so many young people that needed to move on from placements. Aftercare weren’t able to, they weren’t entitled to aftercare, but they weren’t able to manage the level of work even through their duty system ... This role kind of developed again, I think, out of identifying a gap and a need. Which I think is, you know, it’s quite progressive in the things that we’ve been doing in terms of, although we’re stretched ... we’re looking at the gaps ... So ... she’s based in Dublin, but she’s travelling

all around the country. And again, trying to forge those links. With the councils, you know, with the schools, with, you know, everything. It's like, it's a huge, for one person. It's in its infancy, but so far we've seen a really big difference. She's making an impact in terms of, you know, supporting young people, but also getting the needs of our young people met and, and known around the area and around the country."

Worry about aftercare impacting time in care

Young people and professionals alike spoke about turning 18 as a source of worry. When asked about situations or issues that are most stressful for them, most young people who were interviewed mentioned worry about what would happen when they reached adulthood. There was recognition too from professionals that the post-18 period impacted young people long before they actually turned 18, with worry about what would happen affecting their time in Tusla's care. One professional working in a residential centre stated:

"Aftercare is the biggest piece, because a lot of our young people come in at 16 or 17. But they're under pressure from the minute they get here to prepare for 18."

The lack of information and uncertainty surrounding the time where they would turn 18 was a source of particular stress. One Tusla professional described how some young people "can't wait to get away from Tusla" but that others are "just so panicked" about leaving care:

"I've had some who are just ... were so panicked, with turning 18. And, you know, just the uncertainty of ... what the future is going to hold. And just ... the reality of having to navigate a lot of things by themselves without the support of staff or a social worker, an aftercare worker. The room share has been a big scare. Say, for the ones that have moved to IPAS, I've had two young people who moved to IPAS and they were sharing rooms, and they would have been in single occupancy. I think one was in foster care, and one was a residential unit. So the room sharing was something that was big for them."

Young people often did not know in advance where they would be accommodated. One young person, who in general was complimentary about Tusla's care, talked about there being confusion when his 18th birthday was approaching as there was a possibility he could remain in his foster placement post-18 but that it was also possible that he could be sent to a hotel. He indicated that he was afraid to leave the country to visit his family in case he lost his place in foster care. Young people also often appeared to have limited or no understanding of the nature of the accommodation in

which they would be based – down to practical things like whether they would have somewhere secure to store their belongings. One professional stated:

“Yeah, they’re very worried because they have so many questions, and no one can answer them. No one can give them any confirmation. You know, even simple questions around like, ‘How do I keep my belongings safe?’ because they have an iPad, or they have a laptop. And they’re not going to be able to carry them all the time with them, and I can’t tell them that they’re going to have a locker. I don’t know what the set-up is going to be like. So, there’s so much uncertainty.”

Another young person also spoke about the stress caused by a lack of information. She talked about trying to negotiate university entrance and somewhere to live after her 18th birthday. Her sense of worry and stress is evident in what she says:

“I was trying to figure out what the situation is, like, whether I would need to pay, you know, student fees, and I was also trying to figure out what would happen after I turned 18, like, there were like, a lot of things ... I was like, ‘Oh my God, like, what’s gonna happen when I turn 18?..Oh my god, what's gonna happen? How am I gonna am I gonna find, like, accommodation?’ Like, I, I wasn’t sure if I could get, like, enough money from being a part-time worker and a full-time student. And I was like, ‘oh my God, What do I do?’”

Ultimately, this young person was helped by an EPIC advocate who informed her of her rights and helped her to secure accommodation and her aftercare allowance.

Sometimes young people didn’t know until the morning of their move where they would be living. One residential care worker stated:

“And you know ... it might be tented accommodation or it might be centres. It’s hard to know. And I don’t know if they will be told the morning of the move that they’re going that day.”

The transition to aftercare was described as “a bit fast” by one young person. The abruptness of it was very aptly put:

“You get a cake. Then you have to leave.”

Tusla professionals also spoke about uncertainty surrounding post-18 arrangements, particularly when young people did not have their status. They referred to a process of “parallel planning” whereby two aftercare plans were created: one covering the young person if they secured their

refugee status or subsidiary protection, and one covering the young person if they remained without status:

“The challenges that I had found when I was working within aftercare, you’re parallel planning. So you get your status, you don’t get your status, right all the way up. And then it could be the last minute they get their positive determination. And then you go, and you’ve got to do an application for housing and this and this and this because a whole different ... With their right to education, you know, you might have to ... kind of do a different trajectory ... [It’s] very hard because you’re ... trying to plan. You’ve got two plans. You know, that’d be hard for anybody, you know, for simple things. But these are big life-changing [things].”

One Tusla professional commented that the difference between the two types of plans “is so wide” and gave an example of this:

“So like we had a case recently where it was three days before her 18th birthday, she had her decision. So one plan was that she was staying with her carers that were fantastic. They were essentially her parents and staying in her lovely school and going to do really well. Or she’d have to go to an IPAS centre. Or they’d have to come to some sort of private agreement that we couldn’t be involved in, you know, because of the financials.”

While Tusla participants were generally of the view that being accommodated under Section 5 or under a care order didn’t really impact the nature of the work and service they provided to young people, it was acknowledged that when young people’s care was the subject of court proceedings (due to being “in care”), outcomes of international protection applications tended to come immediately before a young person’s 18th birthday, due to the court putting pressure on the IPO to give a decision:

“And in my experience, I’ve also found that the last-minute decisions are normally made for those children that are within the court system in terms of Interim Care Orders, in terms of having a care order. So ... because ... by being in the court system, they have a guardian ad litem (GAL) allocated to them, advocating for them within the court system. Which might be a different case for a child that’s not on a care order. They don’t have a GAL, they don’t have someone advocating for them in the court system to say, ‘Hey, get the IPO subpoenaed to make a decision ...’ So the GAL can say, okay, have the IPO subpoenaed to come to court. And well ... in my experience, once that happens, a decision comes. But what happens to that young person that doesn’t have a social worker or that has a social worker allocated but isn’t within the court system? ... So it means that there’s no one putting that kind of pressure for a decision to be made. For them, the outcome ultimately is completely different.”

Disruptive moves

While best practice would suggest that transitions out of care should generally involve trying to maintain as much continuity as possible, this was often not possible in the case of separated children, again, it seemed, because of the shortage of accommodation. While young people could request their preferences as regards what county they would be accommodated in by IPAS, one professional working in a residential setting indicated that consideration of this preference depended on the availability of IPAS accommodation. She drew attention to the fact that while young people might have “established themselves” in a given area in terms of attending a local mosque or being involved in a club, their preference might be to try to live where their friends have moved to. This might suggest efforts to create continuity in some aspects of their lives, resulted in discontinuity in other realms:

“They can request the county or area that they want to be in. And like, for example, they’re in fifth year in school. So we would encourage them to remain in this county. They have established themselves. They’re in the country a year, and they have mosque, and clubs, but a lot of them like to travel wherever their friends have been. So if their friends have been moved to like Cork or Dublin, then they want to go there so that they have a friend. But again, their preference isn’t really taken into consideration. It depends on the availability of an IPAS centre.”

An employee of an NGO with many years of experience working with separated children expressed her frustration that it remained the case that separated children who turned 18 were moved to IPAS accommodation, sometimes in different counties. In the case she referenced, this led to disruption in schooling:

“I think that is still, I mean, it’s crazy to still be talking about this after so many years, but separated children who turn 18 and don’t have their status are getting transferred into IPAS. I was talking to a youth worker last week ... who had been supporting a separated child in their local town, was in her Leaving Cert year, turned 18. She got pulled out of school, transferred to a new county. And, to be honest, I just can’t believe that this is still happening.”

However, some young people were located in centres near to their original accommodation. One young person who participated was given accommodation in the same locality as his previous placement. He was able to visit his old centre for a while after the move. But after some time had passed and staff changed in the centre, he found that nobody there knew him and he was no longer

invited in for coffee when he called to visit. However, this young person also spoke about the considerable challenges living in a large accommodation centre for adults and families, particularly when he was trying to focus on school:

“It was really hard because we’re very, very unique because everybody, nobody in the hotel, my age was going to school. I was the only one. In the hotel, in the hotel there, I don’t know how many people there, maybe up to a thousand.”

He described how he “had trouble pursuing his regime” with those around him living a different lifestyle. He mentioned the use of drugs and alcohol among other residents, and different sleep schedules, while he was trying to focus on his studies. Eventually, his school circulated a message on WhatsApp to the school community seeking a host family for him, and several families came forward. He then continued to live with this family until after his Leaving Cert was completed.

Moving to a different geographical location also could mean disruption in the ability to pursue one’s interests and hobbies. One professional referred to a young person who was “really struggling” with the lack of sport and leisure facilities available to them since moving to an IPAS centre at age 18. The interviewee stated:

“Under Tusla’s care, she would have had access to all of these activities that she could do. And then suddenly, she was in direct provision and she had nothing, and she had only €38 a week, and she was like, ‘You know, I was in swimming classes. I was in a football club,’ all of that kind of stuff.”

This comment points to the stark difference between Tusla care and IPAS accommodation, something which will be returned to.

In addition, after moving out of Tusla care, young people could spend some time in IPAS accommodation in one location and then be relocated to another location, particularly after refugee status is secured. One Tusla professional spoke of a young person with whom she was working:

“Um, like yesterday there was a young person sent me in a letter that he’s after getting notice to leave his IPAS centre ... But at the end of the letter from IPAS it says that if he can’t find accommodation within six weeks, he’s going to be moved down to Clare to tented accommodation. And I know when I go to try and get a homeless needs assessment for that young person, the homeless section are going to say to me, ‘Actually, he has alternative accommodation’. So then he’s left to only kind of source private rented accommodation within Dublin because his links are in Dublin now. He’s in education. He has a peer group. He’s settled. So, you know, and the chances of him getting private rented accommodation,

it's just going to be a mountain to climb, you know? It's just going to be so difficult. So it's going to be a battle now that I have to take on and support him with the local authority to try and get him accommodation in Dublin. Yeah."

Other research studies point to the particular challenges that members of minority ethnic communities and people who previously lived in direct provision face in securing accommodation (Foreman and Ní Raghallaigh, 2020). One Tusla professional spoke of racism within a local authority:

"... Another one of the aftercare workers, he had an experience there with a young person, with one of the local authorities where it was just blatant racism. They were trying to access like a homeless needs assessment. And ... it ended up like that you had to get like a solicitor involved and actually EPIC, with their legal team, they have community law mediation, they're supporting around it. But the line of questioning that the housing officer was asking that young person was so completely inappropriate and, like, shocking. Like, it was aggressive. So she had been living in an IPAS and I think it was down in Cork and they wanted to accommodate her up in Donegal. And the housing officer said to her like, 'Well, you got here from Somalia. Why can you not get here from Cork, go from Cork to Galway?' Like, you know, and she was going to school like in Cork."

Another Tusla professional referred to separated young people ageing out of care as "extremely vulnerable". She pointed to the fact that there are not enough aftercare units available and that within these units, young people cannot move on as quickly as before. She said:

"... With the housing crisis ... a lot of them are ending up in emergency accommodation, and there isn't enough aftercare units."

Lack of support: The stark difference between Tusla care and IPAS accommodation

The stark difference between the care environment of Tusla and the environment within many IPAS centres was commented on by several professionals. As is evident from the previous section, and notwithstanding the challenges within the care system, young people usually lived in environments before turning 18 where they had support available around the clock, often from experienced professionals. In contrast, within IPAS centres, young people appeared to be very much left to support themselves. One professional commented:

"I just think it's a big shock. Gone from a kind of small, more residential system, or a building with someone, that point of contact that they can always go to. They have the same age

cohort and a little more direct support in these smaller settings. I'll give you an example. There's a centre in [name of location]. It's about 400 single males. It's a big hotel, and it's quite the macho place. The different communities interact differently with each other. And for a young lad to go into that, it can be daunting. I guess you could consider it almost like prison, in a way of just being like, I've been thrown into it. And they've come from a centre with six young people. Then they could be put in a room with six or seven other adults ..."

The same professional pointed to the ways in which the young people manage this kind of situation:

"... It's kind of sink or swim and some of them will just literally sit by themselves, will not engage, won't reach out for help, won't do anything that way. They just kind of keep their heads down, and, you know, try and do their own thing."

Professionals were unanimously of the view that for young people who turned 18 without yet having an outcome for their international protection claim, the aftercare supports were extremely limited, almost non-existent. This was of concern to social care staff in relation to young people who left their care and to staff of NGOs who encountered young people in their work in IPAS centres. One social care professional highlighted that while there were "excellent" aftercare workers, there were no resources:

"But there's just very little aftercare support. There's aftercare workers, and they are excellent, but there's no resources. So again, I just think the state is failing. And these young people, when it comes to that. And again, I think if you had that integration and community approach at least, and they'd have somebody to lean on and somebody even just to contact ... But yeah, I just think the resources and the state need to look at preparing them from 17."

Other professionals concurred with this view:

"I think the biggest thing is the supports. The supports need to be put into them. If they're obviously funding them, and they want them in the country, they should be funding them properly and fund them to the full extent of the care. Not just till they're 18 and wiping their hands of them."

Tusla professionals were also very conscious of the dearth of supports for young people reaching 18. It was evident that they worried about young people who aged out of their services. One professional pointed to the fact that other cohorts of care leavers often have some support from their birth families, but that this is not the case for separated children. Her words point to the pressure on services and the fact that when one young person leaves Tusla's care, another young person is allocated to the social worker:

“I definitely think there could be a lot more supports or services out there, like step-down services. I think the cohort of young people that are leaving our care would be as vulnerable as you know, Irish children leaving care. But a lot of the Irish children have the support of you know, their birth families. And obviously, I don’t know statistics, but it’s more than likely that, you know, they might have an aunt or an uncle that they can fall back on when they’re 18 and they’ve left the care system. But our young people don’t have anybody ... The only relationships [they] have more than likely formed with, you know, the staff in their centres or social workers. But you know we cut the cord at 18, because now like I’ve another case that I’ve replaced you with that I have to tend to, a 15- or 16-year-old ...”

While this professional’s account suggests a very harsh cutting of supports, the reality of her practice seemed to be more nuanced, evidencing ongoing concern for young people who were not still allocated to her. The same professional articulated the desire to keep in contact and help the young people but while also needing to prioritise the under-18s in the context of a high caseload:

“I’m one of the bad ones. I stretch it out for another couple of weeks or months, and you know, I’d always call down to see them. So for the ones that have moved to IPAS, you know, I’d drop in and see them. Just see how they’re settling in. But you know ... I would maintain phone contact ... I texted a few of them there during the week, erm ... but again, you know, you’re trying to limit contact as well, because obviously, you know, they can’t rely on you for everything, and you’re trying to signpost them as well, you know, to the aftercare drop-in service as well ... But I would not, not answer my phone to them ... Obviously, like you’ve a high caseload. Now, my priority is obviously the under-18s. But ... because you know that they’ve nobody else, you will do what you can ... So if they call, and they’re like ... ‘I need to register for this, or where do I go?’ You know, I would not not tell them, ‘Look, I’m not your social worker anymore.’ I can’t.”

Often young people had established relationships with staff while in residential care; leaving these relationships was not easy. One residential care worker stated:

“And the worry ... but they’re constantly telling us how much they’re going to miss us and like you can actually see the attachment that they formed, which is really nice, because they might have never had that before in their life.”

The same professional spoke of efforts to maintain contact with young people but within the confines of professional boundaries – her description mirrors some of what the Tusla professional cited above stated in terms of wanting to help but there being limits to the extent this was possible:

“We’re very open to maintaining contact. Once it’s, you know, through the team’s contact phone, and then we’ll have a log, you know, in terms of safeguarding and stuff like that. And the same professional boundaries will come in place for the team, you know, around like individually having contact afterwards ... It’s very hard to build such trust in a relationship, and to get so far with them and then just say, sorry we don’t work with you anymore. You know, we have prepared them for the fact that we would love to meet them for coffees. We just have to plan these things. And that if they want to come down to visit, they may not be allowed to, because we’ll have other young people, and that they can always ring us for advice, but we can’t help them to apply for things like we do now, but we can advise them in what to do.”

While such efforts to maintain relationships have clear value, it is also evident that these relationships had their limitations. A young person also referred to this. He was fortunate to remain living near his placement after turning 18 and he used that placement as an address if he ordered anything online as he felt it was safer. He described how initially he would be invited in when he went to collect his parcel, but over time this changed:

“And for example, previously when staff that knew me were receiving a parcel for me ... initially it was working fine. I was coming in maybe, I don’t remember if I will have coffee, but yeah, whatever. I was just getting my parcel. Everybody would know me. I would come down. I would talk and all. But later when the new staff came, they would prefer me to stay outside. ... they would take the parcel ... and give it to me. Which is fine for now if they didn’t know me. Yeah. There was those new staff who didn’t know me, which yeah ...”

One young person described several placement moves during her time in care. While she was allowed stay in her accommodation when she turned 18 until she finished school, she had to move once her schooling ended. She said:

“So, the hell started. The hell started. I mean, I went homeless.”

She entered homeless accommodation, a hotel, which she described as a “not very good place”. In the subsequent months, she had several different accommodation arrangements that didn’t work out: renting a room in a house where the landlord then needed the room for a family member, renting a room in a house where she felt she wasn’t treated well, returning to the homeless hotel on two occasions, living in another homeless hotel, before finally getting more long-term supported accommodation via EPIC. She described the negative impact of this on her mental health:

“Well, it’s really hard, to be honest. Sometimes you won’t feel alive as well. Mental issue – I was depressed at that time. But now I’m happy.”

Examples of positive experiences

Only one young person spoke positively about turning 18, indicating that she was pleased to turn 18 mostly because she was looking forward to going to college and leaving the care system. Of note here is the fact that she had discussed a lot of difficulties in her relationships with staff and other young people while in a residential setting. In relation to whether she had looked forward to turning 18, she said:

“Yes, I was very much [looking forward to it] ... well, mostly because I knew that after I turn 18, I’m like, I’m here like ... I would be where I am now ... basically going to college and ... like just living. I would say I’m less stressed now ... I am way less stressed now.”

Another young person was full of praise for the host family with whom he stayed after turning 18. His school found this family for him. His description of the family highlights not only the very practical help that the family offered but also how a meaningful relationship developed between them:

“So they were really good to me and very supportive ... extremely good. I could not imagine how it could be better. The family is really nice. They encouraged me to stay in touch after I moved on. And on the Christmas, I received presents, on the Easter, I received presents. Like, they were a really, really nice family, which, yeah ... I did my Leaving Cert with them. They asked me to share my results with them ... Well, honestly, they helped me a lot. I wouldn’t like to be a burden on them for a long time ...”

He described how the father of the foster family helped him when moving and described, humorously, how the dad encouraged him to stay in touch:

“One day, when I was moving, I happened not to be able to carry all the things to my new accommodation or something. So the father of the family, the guy, offered to drive to a place and bring them. And so this last time when I saw him, he did say that I should be keeping in touch with them. If there is any need to contact them, I should and to share the results with them. And like down to the very funny thing that he said, if one time I am in [name of town] hanging out with friends and I’m drunk and I can’t go home, I can stay in their house ... Honestly, I’m not planning to benefit from it ... He was extraordinary. I believe he was one of those people who are one [in a] million.”

While the exception rather than the rule, there were examples given of IPAS centres where there were good practices taking place. One professional pointed to the “resident welfare team” established in one IPAS centre, suggesting that such a team allowed for residents to obtain individual support:

“... They have kind of an in-house resident welfare team that do kind of psychosocial stuff themselves, which is great, which is very helpful, but that’s not the norm in any of the centres ... The contractor themselves said we’re going to invest in that, which is definitely a great model, and we wish it was rolled out elsewhere. Because they can reach people on a one-to-one level, and they do lots of things around mental health and understanding your mental health, and then just accessing other types of things, courses and educational opportunities, which is really good. We don’t have to do so much of the work when we go there ... That’s a very unique centre. And other centres are now trying to get that model of having a kind of resident welfare team that’s not IPAS, that is hired by the centre themselves.”

There were examples too of individual workers watching out for young people in adult accommodation. For example, one participant, who worked in a reception centre for adults, spoke of her role as one of advocacy, and described it as akin to a “parental role”. She described how she supported a young person who indicated that he was 17 but whom Tusla did not accept to be a minor. She discussed how she tried to support him to continue with his education:

“At one point, actually, I had a lovely young guy ... So every morning, I actually started going into work every morning and dragging him out of bed. And I said, ‘Right, up you get.’ And it was very much like I was a mom. I was, ‘Up out of bed. Get dressed. I want to see you in the breakfast hall in 20 minutes before you get on the bus.’ And he kept giving out at the time because he was like, you’re not my mom and blah blah, but he had left home when he was 15. And he’d been through some horrific things to get to Ireland. He was a teenager, so he was gonna give out, naturally. But he needed someone to tell him, ‘Get your butt out the door and into class ...’ I still talk to him now a year-and-a-bit later, and he has a part-time job. He’s in his second year of pre- [university] course. He wants to apply for a university scholarship when they open up ... He’s doing really, really well, he’s doing really well.”

Gaps in knowledge among professionals: Training needs

The increased number of people seeking international protection in recent years, including separated children, has resulted in many more professionals working in this field. Evidence from the interviews

suggested that within the sector of people working with separated children, there was a mix of those with relevant qualifications and many years of experience with this cohort; those with relevant qualifications but limited experience with this cohort but extensive experience in other areas of practice; those with relevant qualifications but limited experience in any areas of practice; and those with limited qualifications and limited experience. The findings suggest a steep learning curve for many and gaps in the provision of training and support to enable reskilling and upskilling.

In particular, the increase in numbers necessitated the establishment of new residential centres for separated children and several of the professional participants had been involved in the establishment of such centres in recent years. Of the seven residential care professionals who participated who were currently working in residential settings, five were managers of a centre or a service but had no prior experience of working with separated children before taking up the manager role. They had extensive social care experience, either in mainstream children's residential care or in disability services. They pointed to the multiple challenges involved in this work and the steep learning curve for the services, managers and staff. Those who were managers were faced not only with learning themselves but also with supporting the learning and development of their staff, some of whom did not have a social care background.

One manager of a residential centre talked about the challenge of tapping into the expertise that had been developed within Tusla over many years, suggesting there was no structured way to access the knowledge of experienced practitioners:

"So you know, as we became more established, and I suppose there was a real realisation that you know [Tusla's service for separated children] has been about for decades, basically, and to tap into that was very difficult. And the experience I have had to date is, there's one or two people there that you know you can contact, and they can share what they have in their head, their own knowledge with you. But there's nowhere to actually access that."

Similarly, another residential care professional highlighted the fact that there was no guidance available on how to work with separated children:

"There's no guidance on how we should be working with them, or what we should be doing. Or are we doing things right? There's nobody coming and checking except once a year. So you've no feedback like, if you're doing the right thing with them, or if you should be doing this, or do you know different things like that? I think managers, staff teams would really appreciate, just to know that they are on the right pathway rather than just following what, say, I know from previous work, you know ..."

A Tusla professional who participated also referenced the learning curve for new staff and the potential impact of having a lot of new staff. She pointed to the fact that while there were quite a number of staff members who had been working on the SCSIP team for many years (some were working on it “forever”, she said!), the proportion of staff with “expertise” was smaller, given the team’s expansion:

“I think maybe you know what can happen sometimes when a team grows very, very quickly kind of catching up with things, it can be hard for ... with a lot of new people on the team. So we have a lot of new, not inexperienced, I don’t use the word inexperienced, it may be experience in different areas ... you know way more new people who are learning as they go along, you know, and obviously that with all due respect to everybody that is new and learning as they go along, that is going to impact to a certain degree the service that the young people are getting, and I mean that respectfully, because, of course, you know ... as you’re learning, and you’re picking things up as you go along, and how you might respond to certain things, and how that might impact the kids, and how that might make them feel about the service, and how they’re being supported, etc. But the heart is always there with separated children, I mean, that’s what I know, that the heart is there and the commitment is always there and it’s an honour for me.”

In contrast, a social care worker who was working in a long-established centre pointed to the benefits of having an experienced staff group:

“I actually think the residential experience is really good. I do work with a very strong team, a very experienced team. And so that obviously helps. All of their needs as much as we can possibly do are met. I actually feel the service, that for separated children coming into care, I can only speak from my experience, my residential setting is pretty good ...”

Professionals identified the need for training in relation to different topics, including: culture and how to work with people from different cultural backgrounds; the impact of conflict on children; human trafficking; bias, intersectionality, anti-racism; mental health first aid; and training on practical elements (e.g. the international protection process; the rights of separated children, etc.) to allow professionals to provide information and to advocate. HSeLanD was identified as a source of relevant training but it was identified that more was needed. When asked what would be beneficial in supporting young people, one staff member specifically spoke about the need for more specialised training for staff:

“I suppose, having like specific people that are trained in war trauma, we would see like even just to have that training spread out through residentials, or whoever, supporting war trauma

kids, like that would be a massive [benefit] I think, previous to them arriving. There's a difference in war trauma and normal trauma, you know. So just knowing what to say when they disclose things, knowing, I suppose. Yeah ... you can build up the relationship, do all those things. But there's also a certain way to deal with, when they open up [about] things. What to say to them ... if their parents are after being shot in front of them, or you know just how to support them out of it, or how to support them when they're talking to you. That would have been very beneficial previous to them coming in, and the staff team, or even newer staff starting, having that on as a mandatory training, I would see most important, I think, just for every day, for them and for us."

It was highlighted too that generic training that professionals might receive may not be sufficient for working with this cohort of children. One professional, who was social work trained, highlighted that in her experience, social work training was geared towards working with Irish children in the care system, not asylum-seeking children:

"... To train as a social worker, you're training to look after Irish children. And that's not the reality of children seeking asylum. You're not given any extra training really to work with children seeking asylum as a social worker. So I think before a social worker can apply for a job, or even after they have applied for a job, training such as I think we need to have really an intersectional view. And I talk about this so much. Sometimes I feel like it's redundant. It is so very true, that you cannot look at a child seeking asylum and use the same knowledge you have about a child in state care. You can't. It doesn't work. You need to understand the different layers of ... oppression, of neglect, of harm that have happened to these children, and if you don't, you're harming them further."

Regarding training in relation to culture, one professional who had previously worked in a residential centre for separated children before moving to an NGO, spoke about the need for training in relation to working cross-culturally and questioned whether any progress had been made in that regard since work with separated children first commenced in the late 1990s:

"We had no cultural training and had to deal with young people from different cultures. I don't know whether that has ever been delivered since, but I remember that one of the things that we were messing up on a lot was like just cultural differences. One of the things I remember very clearly was like having worked with African children ... it's highly disrespectful sometimes for a young person to like, look you in the eye. But of course, here in Ireland we're like, look at me when I'm speaking to you."

Aligned with the need for training on culture, it was highlighted that training in relation to biases and misconceptions was also needed:

“Anybody who works with children seeking asylum, we definitely need to have training on bias and misconceptions because we are human beings. And as a result of that, we all walk around with our own biases, and if those biases are not challenged, that will reflect in how I work with children, and I have seen it where the first thing a social worker would say is, ‘I’m not racist.’ ‘I did not say you’re racist, but I’m saying you’re walking around with biases that might inform how you work with a child, and that might be causing harm, consciously or unconsciously.’ So definitely, some sort of prejudice ... bias, misconception kind of training, anti-racism training for sure definitely is needed.”

In order to support young people to the best possible extent, it was recognised that professionals needed to be knowledgeable of the relevant systems and rights of this cohort. For example, the importance of young people understanding the international protection process was acknowledged by participants, but some professionals working in residential settings outlined their own limited knowledge of the process due to being new to this area of work. One participant, working in a residential home, stated:

“Well, everything was very new to me, so it’s still trying to get your head around it. I suppose the different meetings with the IPO and the different colour [immigration] cards, and the right to work and the family reunification. And those things, you know, that’s the area that I suppose I’m personally struggling with, trying to get my head around.”

Similarly, another professional, also working in a residential home, described it as being hard to get information about working with separated children. She described how she and her team were “learning as we’re going” but had a thirst to learn more in order to be able to best support the young people. She pointed to the need for information about the international protection process:

“To be honest with, you know, different things, even in relation to, you know, like different statuses and application processes and stuff like that, because I suppose we want to get as much education around that, so we can support the young people as far as possible.”

An example of an innovative response to this need for education around the international protection process is a service developed by the UNHCR in collaboration with Tusla in 2024, whereby separated children can attend information sessions regarding the process. It was identified that this service was being provided because often the children “don’t understand what it means to apply for asylum”. Having similar sessions for professionals may also be beneficial.

Of importance here is the fact that aspects of the international protection process change over time, thus suggesting the need for ongoing training and support, even for seasoned workers. An experienced Tusla professional highlighting this fact:

“[The IPO processes] have changed so many times in the last two-and-a-half years, you know, which look, I appreciate that ... the questionnaire has gotten a lot shorter, but the processes have changed and trying to keep up with that, as workers is very, very difficult, you know when processes are constantly changing.”

It was also indicated by Tusla that one of its principal social workers now had a specific training remit, a role with potential to significantly upskill those working with separated children and young people.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses mainly on the circumstances of separated young people after they have turned 18, but also discusses the training needs of professionals working in this space. Regarding aftercare, it highlighted the significant challenges facing young people as they leave the accommodation settings provided by Tusla, and the fact that worry about aftercare impacts their time before turning 18 also. The findings reported in this chapter point to the considerable impact of the accommodation crisis for adult international protection applicants and the wider housing crisis on “aged-out” separated children. The interviews with professionals and young people alike suggest a stark difference between the support available to young people before they turn 18 and the supports available afterwards and the concerted efforts of practitioners to address these within a system lacking in resources and capacity.

Chapter 8: Summary of key findings and recommendations for policy and practice

Introduction

This final chapter summarises the key findings from this study. In addition, it points to recommendations that are drawn from the review of current policy developments and informed by the findings from the interviews with both young people and stakeholders. The study shows that the experiences of separated children in Ireland are shaped by a complex interplay of individual, legal, social, and political factors. As this report has explored, these children face unique vulnerabilities arising from their status as children without parental care, who are often navigating unfamiliar systems while coping with trauma, loss, displacement and stigma. However, these children also demonstrate agency, capacity and resilience that needs recognition and support within the care system.

Ireland made significant strides when putting an end to hostel care in 2010 and committing instead to “equity of care”, where reception and care procedures and practices were more sensitive to the needs of separated children. However, in recent years, with increased numbers of children arriving into a challenging context, this progress is under threat. Despite concerted efforts and commitment from professionals working with separated children, there are now significant gaps in provision. Going forward, the system of care for separated children needs to be further developed to ensure it is responsive to the diverse needs of this cohort. What is needed is a system that can provide care, protection and access to services and that recognises the individuality of each young person, taking into account their past and present circumstances and their desires for the future. It is important to ensure that the rights of separated children are effectively protected, and that children are provided with the best level of care possible within available resources and with greater consistency and efficiency.

Regulated and inspected care arrangements are vital, but the particular circumstances of separated children – as outlined in this report – need to always be given due attention, taking into account that the Irish care system was not developed with this cohort in mind. There is a need for the system for separated children and the system for adult international protection accommodation and support to be developed in tandem with one another, with the human rights and needs of each individual to the forefront, thus ensuring more seamless transitions to adulthood. In addition, it is crucial that the workforce is suitably qualified and supported so that separated children can be facilitated to better

understand their rights and to access them. Added to this, consideration needs to be given to the complex national and international contexts, in which anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment appear to be rising. Given the increased likelihood that separated children seeking international protection will encounter racism and hostility, anti-racist policies and practices need to be prioritised.

Summary of findings

Legal status of separated children

The research points to the fact that upon arrival in Ireland, different sections of the Child Care Act are applied to separated children, with Section 5 being used predominantly. A decision on which provision of the 1991 Act to rely on can have implications for the rights and support services available to the child concerned. Where Section 5 is used, it is likely that important statutory safeguards will be absent, such as the allocation of a social worker, the development of a care plan, periodic child in care reviews and access to court and to the statutory entitlement to aftercare.

As suggested by UNHCR Ireland (2024), the review of the Child Care Act 1991 (as amended) provides an opportunity to amend the act to include specific provisions that provide greater clarity as to how unaccompanied and separated children are admitted into the care of Tusla. Where the consent of parents cannot be sought, there is a need to examine whether there are options that ensure separated children are provided with an equivalent level of protection but without the need to seek a care order from the court in all cases (UNHCR Ireland, 2024).

Age determination

The research highlights the contentious nature of age assessment and the tensions between organisations in this regard. It highlights too the very significant impact of age assessment decisions: there are negative repercussions for children and young people if they are deemed to be adults. In particular, their entitlements to family reunification are significantly reduced, with potentially devastating consequences both for the young person in question and their family members. As such, it is of utmost importance that age assessments are conducted by qualified, trained and experienced staff in line with international best practice standards, that the benefit of the doubt is given, and that when there is a dispute about someone's age that they have access to an independent appeals mechanism in a timely manner. While the appeal is being processed, they should not be accommodated in the adult international protection accommodation system, which potentially exposes the young people in question to risk and exacerbates vulnerability. In addition, procedures

should be put in place to help to identify young people who may present as 18 even though they are in fact children. It is important to note that age determination may become even more significant under the EU Pact, given that border procedures will not apply to under-18s. The complexities surrounding age assessment raise questions about Tusla's proposed new model of care under which the child's age will be a significant determinant of the type of care received.

Care arrangements

The findings suggest the vital importance of appropriate care arrangements for separated children seeking international protection, given the likely significant impact of such care on the life trajectories of these young people. The diverse views of the young people who took part in the study, and the diverse profile of separated children more generally, suggest the need for individualised care planning and a variety of different kinds of care settings. A one-size-fits-all approach will not meet the needs of this cohort and neither can it be assumed that the care arrangements that might generally be considered best for Irish children in the care system are necessarily suitable for this group of young people. As such, policymakers in this area need to consistently consider the specific and unique needs of separated children and ensure a range of flexible care options are available. It is not surprising that in the context of a rapid increase in the number of arrivals, Tusla began to rely more on residential care settings, rather than foster care, given the upscaling of such provision is likely to be easier. Nonetheless, the important benefits of foster care for many young people should be remembered as policies and practices in relation to care provision continue to develop in the years to come. There is wide recognition that foster care can work very well for many separated children, with UNHCR recently recommending that community-based foster care should be strengthened by Tusla (UNHCR Ireland, 2024).

Independent inspection of *all* care options – whether residential care or foster care, whether privately run or run by Tusla – is also very important. The data points clearly to concerns about Special Emergency Arrangements and to the desire of Tusla to end their use.

The findings also point to the critically important role played by those caring for separated children in the various forms of accommodation currently on offer. Ensuring that staff are appropriately trained regarding the needs of separated children and young people and regarding best practice in working with them is of vital importance going forward. As is always the case in social care, such training needs to be available on a continuous professional development (CPD) basis rather than being a once-off provision.

Availability of services throughout the country

Recent years have shown a significant change in the geographical spread of where separated children are living. While historically the vast majority of separated children were living in the Dublin area or in counties near to Dublin, with all residential centres located in that region, this is no longer the case. The findings highlighted the fact that the Dublin-centric nature of services means that young people who are placed outside of Dublin face potential disadvantage compared to their Dublin-based peers. Regarding social work support, having a primarily Dublin-based team providing services to young people who are situated throughout the country makes it very challenging for regular in-person meetings to take place and for relationships to be built. It is also likely to result in inefficiency within a very stretched team. As such, having a better spread of social work services for separated children should be considered at a policy level. Challenges regarding the geographical location of education services is also an issue. The research suggests that there are more options available to meet the particular educational needs of separated children in Dublin compared with elsewhere. Given the right to education enshrined in our constitution, the importance of education to many separated children and young people, and its important role for their future lives, this issue needs urgent attention.

Access to integration support and to youth and community work services

Facilitating separated children and young people to resettle and to thrive requires a national cross-sectoral approach, with key services available throughout the country. Separated children and young people need to be facilitated to both integrate into Irish society and to hold on to their own cultural backgrounds. While social work services have a key role to play in this regard, as do carers in residential settings or foster placements, a broader community-based approach is also needed. Local youth and community work services can play a pivotal role, perhaps particularly given the rise in anti-refugee sentiment at a local level. While Local Authority Integration Teams (LAITs) do not have a remit that covers separated children under the age of 18, they have a significant role to play in signposting those who have turned 18 to relevant services and supports. Ensuring sufficient and sustainable funding of LAITs, and of the community and youth sector, and ensuring relevant training is provided to those working in these sectors is of vital importance.

Mental health and psychosocial support

The many challenges faced by separated children related to their pre-migration, migration and post-migration experiences suggest that many are likely to need mental health and psychosocial supports. However, the interviews with young people and with professionals also highlight that for many

separated children and young people, it may be the case that they do not wish to avail of counselling or therapy options, at least initially. Care must be taken in ensuring that professionals listen to what young people want and do not want as regards their mental health. Where separated children and young people do want to avail of counselling and therapy, professionals need to have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with this cohort. There is a need also for a more diverse group of mental health professionals, including professionals who can provide services in different languages. In addition, there is an urgent need for interpreters working in the field of mental health to have relevant training in working in this sphere. Overall, the general dearth of child and adolescent mental health services in Ireland impacts separated children too, perhaps to an even greater extent given their specific needs. This needs to be urgently addressed.

Education

The findings highlight the many challenges faced by children themselves and by service providers in accessing appropriate education. Again, the needs of separated children as regards education are likely to differ greatly between one child and another. Some may have very good, if not fluent English and may have come straight from their country of origin where they may have been close to finishing their second-level education. Others may have no English or missed out on many years of school or been accessing education within a very different educational system. As such, there is a need for diverse educational options that allow separated children to pursue their ambitions in a supportive context. It is vital that existing educational services that separated children avail of – including mainstream school, Youthreach, and the City of Dublin ETB Youth and Education Service for Refugees and Migrants – are sufficiently resourced to enable separated children to engage meaningfully. As noted above, it must be ensured that the location in which separated children live does not negatively impact their capacity to engage with education that meets their needs: options need to be available on a national level. In particular, intensive English language supports tailored to older adolescents need to be made available nationally.

Interagency working

The research highlighted that the significant increase in the number of separated children seeking international protection in Ireland has resulted in a corresponding increase in the number of agencies and professionals working with this cohort and with separated young people who have aged out of Tusla's care. The findings suggest that while previously many key professionals in this arena knew each other well, making ad hoc interprofessional working relationships easier to navigate, this has now changed with many who are working in this area not knowing one another or

not knowing about other services that are available. This is exacerbated further by the fact that separated children are now more geographically spread throughout the country. Consideration should therefore be given to developing a national policy framework for separated children and young people to ensure that responsibility for support for separated children does not lie solely with Tusla. It would be beneficial too to have a national level interagency forum focused specifically on separated children to ensure good collaboration between the different state and non-state organisations involved. Ensuring representation of young people on this forum would be important (e.g. someone who has aged out of Tusla's care).

Training and support for professionals

The complexity of the issues facing many separated children – issues related to their pre-migration, migration and post-migration context – highlights the need for professional support from highly skilled individuals who have the knowledge, values, skills and reflective capacity needed to do this work. As such, having individuals who lack suitable professional qualification engaged in this work raises concern about the service that young people will receive and also does a disservice to those individuals trying to undertake these roles. As such, it is imperative that professionals working with separated children and young people are suitably qualified and are in receipt of ongoing training and reflective supervision while engaged in this work. This training should include content on the circumstances of separated children and their needs; on trauma and mental health challenges; on the international protection process and children's rights in that regard; on working cross-culturally and on anti-racist practice. Consideration should be given to ensuring a training strategy is devised so that training is rapidly available to all relevant service providers when the number of separated children increases significantly and when services are expanded in a short space of time.

International protection process

The interviews with young people and with professionals highlighted the difficult nature of the international protection process and the often-protracted stress endured by separated children and young people in relation to it, particularly when final decisions take considerable time. Having access to information about the process and about the rights of international protection applicants is of huge importance. Initiatives like the information sessions provided by UNHCR are to be welcome but it needs to be ensured that these are available to all separated children, with similar sessions available also to those caring for these young people. The data suggest the considerable toll that the international protection process had on young people and highlighted feelings of fear and anxiety in relation to the process and its outcome, with professionals pointing to a lack of child-friendliness

within the system. The findings highlighted the importance of young people being well-supported throughout the process. Overall, the findings suggested a need to consider ways in which the process can be less adversarial and a need to ensure adequate legal and emotional support is provided throughout. Going forward, there will be a need to consider the implications of the EU Pact, including the risks in lowering the level of legal support to “legal counselling” and the role of the “representative” to be appointed to unaccompanied minors.

Contact with family and family reunification

Both the international evidence base and the evidence from this specific study suggest – unsurprisingly – the importance of family to separated children. Within this study, often relationships endured across borders, with parents continuing to play an important role in the lives of their children, despite the distance. The findings suggested that many separated children and young people are hopeful that one day they can be reunited with their family members. There was evidence of contact with family members being facilitated and encouraged by care providers and there was evidence too of both the positive and challenging aspects of this contact. It is vitally important that facilitation of this contact continues to occur across all care settings and that care providers are knowledgeable of the complexity of these relationships so that young people can be supported if the contact is emotionally difficult for them.

Regarding family reunification, an interdepartmental review should be undertaken in relation to the services and supports that are available for separated children and young people as they navigate the family reunification process in order to identify gaps in policy and provision both during the application process and following the arrival of family members. Appropriate funding and service provision need to be put in place to ensure that there are support services available for reunified families, given the practical and relational complexities that refugee family reunification poses for individual separated children and young people and for their family groups.

Aftercare

Evidence suggests that the general cohort of care leavers face considerable challenges upon reaching the age of 18 and that ongoing support is key to ensuring good outcomes (Palmer et al., 2022). Arguably for at least some separated children and young people, this may be even more so, given the absence of family members within their new country.

There is currently a gap in the provision of aftercare and related services for separated children, which is likely to be related to the increase in the use of Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 for

these children. The new model of care proposed by Tusla envisages aftercare planning for 16-year-old separated children even when accommodated under Section 5. It does not envisage aftercare planning for 17-year-olds who are accommodated under Section 5.

The research clearly showed that many separated young people face very significant challenges upon leaving Tusla's care. It highlighted the huge difference between the supports available to them prior to turning 18 and those available after the age of majority is reached. To some degree, this at least partly reflects the various crises happening concurrently in Ireland: a crisis in the international protection accommodation service, a crisis in housing provision, and a crisis in Tusla's services, all of which exacerbate the difficulties of transitioning to adulthood. In this context, and in the context of many separated children leaving care within a short time of arriving in Ireland, particular consideration should be given to ensuring continuity in the support that is provided before and after reaching age 18. Separated children and young people need access to people who will provide support from the early stages of their life in Ireland into adulthood, people with whom they can build trust over time. The state should explore innovative ways of ensuring this support is in place.

Specific measures should be taken to ensure that appropriate accommodation options are available for separated young people turning 18. When "aged-out" separated children move to IPAS accommodation, every effort should be made to transfer them to centres in the location of their choice, so that existing relationships and supports can be maintained. Transferring to centres with a resident welfare team in place should also be facilitated, where possible. Ideally, accommodation specifically for "aged out" young people should be provided, with relevant supports in place. Where young people achieve refugee status or subsidiary protection prior to reaching age 18, and are therefore not entitled to IPAS accommodation, it is crucial that they have access to support from aftercare workers to source accommodation and that this support remains available should it be needed if accommodation arrangements fall through. Cross-sectoral engagement and links between various services are particularly important during the transition period, with Local Authority Integration Teams (LAITs) having an important role to play in this regard, especially in relation to signposting. A joint working proposal between Tusla and LAITs is currently being devised; this is a very positive development.

Research and participation work

This research was exploratory in nature, examining a broad range of issues impacting separated children at a particular point in time. This is consistent with the approach that has to date been in place for research in this area in the Irish context. There is a need for a programme of research in

relation to separated children and, in particular, for longitudinal research that follows separated children over time. As outlined in the methodology chapter, in this research significant barriers were faced by the researchers in accessing separated children under the age of 18 – ultimately leading to their non-inclusion. There is a need for the relevant stakeholders – including researchers themselves, the Tusla team for Separated Children Seeking International Protection, and the Tusla research ethics and data protection offices – to examine these barriers to ensure that the rights of under-18s to participate in research are upheld. This may involve reviewing the HSE National Consent Policy with this cohort in mind. A way forward needs to be found which ensures that high ethical and data protection standards are upheld while simultaneously ensuring that research and participation work can include separated children.

Recommendations

1 Legal status of separated children

The over-reliance on Section 5 and concerns about the adequacy of the level of care and protection provided to separated children need to be addressed without delay. The current review of the Child Care Act 1991 (as amended) should include specific amendments to bring greater clarity to the admission of unaccompanied and separated children into the care of Tusla. These clarifications should be included in the Children (Amendment) Bill 2025 to be published this year.

2 Care arrangements

A range of care arrangements is needed in order to ensure separated children are in receipt of care that meets the individual needs of this very diverse cohort of children. Such care should include residential care and foster care, with concerted efforts made to ensure that the type of residential care or foster care is suited to the child in question. The wishes of children in relation to the type of care that they wish to receive should always be ascertained. In order to ensure good-quality care provision going forward, it is paramount that the Tusla team for Separated Children Seeking International Protection is sufficiently resourced and supported by relevant government departments.

3 Social work support and independent advocacy

Tusla needs to be fully resourced to ensure that all separated children have an allocated social worker. Under the International Protection Bill 2025, the appointment of a “representative” to

support the young person in relation to the international protection process will mean that social workers will no longer have a role in supporting unaccompanied minors with their international protection application. While this may lead to both advantages and disadvantages, this development may present an opportunity for Tusla to ensure that more children are allocated a social worker. In addition to having a social worker, in the absence of an independent guardianship model in the Irish context, all separated children should be able to access an independent advocate, should they wish to do so.

4 Standards of inspection, training and qualifications

A review should be carried out by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to consider the extent to which existing inspection standards are adequate in relation to the specific needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities of separated children, including in relation to staff qualifications, experience and training. This should also review existing mechanisms and safeguards to ensure strong systems are in place to prevent separated children going missing. The review should also ensure robust supports and safeguards are in place for victims of trafficking.

5 Aftercare

Given the particular vulnerability of many separated children, specific policy and legislative provision should be made to ensure that aftercare services and supports for separated children are provided on a formal and consistent basis.

6 Cross-departmental forum and the development of a specific policy framework

A national level interdepartmental/interagency forum should be established to develop a specific policy framework that addresses the unique vulnerabilities, rights and needs of separated children, including when they turn 18. This should take account of the current changing statutory landscape both in relation to child protection and international protection with a view to working towards statutory underpinning of such a policy framework as necessary or appropriate. Such a forum should ensure that structures are in place for key agencies across the care and international protection systems to work together and with other relevant agencies to ensure that there is a consistent level of nationwide supports for separated children. Such supports need to enable separated children to obtain information about their rights and to navigate access to education, health services, integration supports and supports to assist with family reunification. The input and representation of young people with lived experience as a separated young person on this forum should be considered.

7 Education

Interdepartmental and interagency forums and policy frameworks need to ensure that the right to education of separated children is a key priority. The location in which separated children live should not negatively impact their capacity to engage with education that meets their needs and a variety of options should be available. Care and protection status and accommodation placements or transfers should not interrupt the educational pathway of a separated child, including when they have turned 18.

8 Review of procedures under the international protection system as they apply to separated children and the provision of legal assistance and representation

Regular reviews should be carried out to establish whether the relevant procedures that apply to international protection and subsidiary protection applications take account of the specific vulnerabilities of separated children and to ensure a more child-friendly and less adversarial system. Such reviews should also consider whether separated children are receiving sufficient legal support with their applications for international protection under the current arrangements. Sufficient resources should be allocated to ensure that free legal assistance and representation is provided for all separated children for both the first instance and the appeal procedure in a child-friendly and holistic manner.

9 Ensure separated children under the age of 18 can participate in research studies

There is a need for the relevant stakeholders to examine barriers to separated children's participation in research so as to ensure that their right to participate is upheld. Doing so will ensure that policy and practice developments into the future are informed by the voices of children with lived experience.

Concluding comment

To conclude, we return to the title of this study: “‘Be strong – there’s so many problems waiting’: The experiences of separated children seeking international protection in Ireland”. This title draws on a quote from a young person who participated in the research who was asked what advice she would give other young people like herself arriving in Ireland. She stated:

“To be strong ... there’s so many problems waiting. That person [should] be strong and be willing to know something ... willing to learn. The more you learn, the more you get it ... To be good at communication because that will help.”

This young person's advice, while offered to other separated children, is also of value to policymakers designing the various systems in place that impact separated children, to professionals working in this field and to the general public whose actions can also be influential. As the study has shown, there are indeed "many problems" to address, strength is needed, and there is much to learn.

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