

INFORMATION
ANALYSIS
DIRECTORATE



Northern Ireland Care Leavers 2022/23



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Reader Information

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Main uses of document	The main uses of these data are to monitor the delivery of social care services to children, to help assess Trust performance, corporate monitoring, to inform and monitor related policy, and to respond to parliamentary/assembly questions. The bulletin is also used by academics/researchers, the voluntary sector and those with an interest in children in care.
National Statistics	The United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA) has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.
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The statisticians within IAD are out posted from the [Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency](#) (NISRA) and the statistics are produced in accordance with the principles and protocols set out in the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#).

IAD comprises four statistical sections: Hospital Information, Community Information, Public Health Information & Research and Project Support Analysis. This publication is produced by Community Information Branch.

About Community Information Branch: The purpose of Community Information Branch (CIB) is to promote effective decision making in children and adult social services by providing quality information and analysis.

We collect, analyse, and publish a wide range of community information that is used to help monitor the delivery of personal social services policy. Information collected by CIB is used to assess HSC Trust performance, for corporate monitoring, policy evaluation, and to respond to parliamentary/assembly questions. All publications can be found on the [Department of Health's website](#).

Our Vision and Values

- Provide up-to-date, quality information on children and adult social services and community health;
- to disseminate findings widely with a view to stimulating debate, promoting effective decision-making and improvement in service provision; and
- be an expert voice on social care information.

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Key Findings

There were 365 care leavers **aged 16 to 18** in 2022/23

- Some two thirds (66%) of care leavers aged 16 to 18 had GCSEs or other qualifications at the time of leaving care. The proportion of care leavers who had 5 GCSEs A*-C or higher care was 30%.
- Care leavers continue to have a higher proportion of young people with a Statement of Educational Need (22%) compared with the school leaver population (7%).
- Of the care leavers aged 16 to 18 in 2022/23, for whom information was available, 74% were in full time or part time education, training or employment. Some 16% were unemployed and 9% were economically inactive because of caring responsibilities or illness/disabilities.

There were 242 care leavers **aged 19** in 2022/23

- Some 90% of care leavers aged 19 were in contact with Health and Social Care Trusts; with 63% in contact at least once a month.
- Almost three quarters (71%) received some form of ongoing support from social services, including support for higher education and accommodation.
- Of the care leavers for whom information was available, 68% were in education, training or employment – a decrease from the previous year.
- In terms of becoming a parent, 6% of all care leavers aged 19 were parents, 13 young women and young men.

1. Northern Ireland Care Leavers

1.1. BACKGROUND

Children are taken into care for a variety of reasons, the most common being to protect them from abuse or neglect. In other cases their parents could be absent or may be unable to cope due to disability or illness. Children who become looked after by the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust have often suffered many disadvantages in their lives and many of them attain low educational achievements which are likely to impact on their future lives and chances for employment.

The *Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002* came into force in 2005. It aims to improve the life prospects of young people who are looked after by HSC Trusts as they make the transition to independent living and become care leavers. To achieve this, the Act placed enhanced duties on HSC Trusts to support young people who are leaving care.

The main aims of the Act are to prevent premature discharges from care, improve preparation, planning and consistency of support for young care leavers, and to strengthen arrangements for financial assistance. Central to the Act are duties to assess and meet individual's needs, provide Personal Advisers and develop pathway planning for young people up to the age of 21 (or beyond if they are continuing in education)¹.

Standards for Leaving Care Services in Northern Ireland were published by the Department of Health in 2012 which establish minimum standards for leaving and aftercare services. The Standards specify the arrangements, services and procedures that need to be in place and implemented to ensure the delivery of quality services for young people leaving care and to support them in education, employment and training. These Standards apply to HSC Trusts and those other agencies commissioned by a HSC Trust to deliver leaving and aftercare services.

The *Going the Extra Mile (GEM) scheme*² was launched in 2006. The aim of this scheme is to promote continuity and stability of living arrangements in post-care life for young people living with foster carers by ensuring that financial support is available to assist carers to continue to meet the care, accommodation and support needs of these young people until they reach the



¹ The Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 set out in more detail the matters to be taken into account by HSC Trusts when assessing and meeting the needs of those preparing to leave care and those who have left care.

² The scheme is facilitated under the Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002, the Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (NI) 2005 and Volume 8 of the Children (NI) Order 1995 Guidance – Leaving and Aftercare.

age of 21. Allied to this, the scheme also aims to promote better outcomes for young people leaving care in relation to training, employment and education.

The Department recognises the importance of giving young people the best start in life, helping those in need, and in particular improving outcomes for children and young people in care. The Programme for Government initiative is currently being reviewed but any ongoing population target on improving Support for Looked After Children related measure will continue to be reported on annually.

1.2. OC COMMUNITY INFORMATION RETURNS

The community information returns OC1, OC2 and OC3 collect data relating to children in care and care leavers in Northern Ireland, which together are designed to monitor and assess outcomes for children while they are in care and after leaving care. The OC1 return collects information on educational attainment of care leavers aged 16 to 18, the OC2 return collects information relating to the educational qualifications and health of children looked after continuously for 12 months and the OC3 return collects information on the economic activity of care leavers aged 19. This bulletin reports findings from the OC1 and OC3 returns relating to the year ending 31 March 2023.

1.3. CARE LEAVERS

Children admitted to care may be discharged, if appropriate, at any age. *Care Leavers* in this bulletin cover young people aged 16 to 18 who left care during the year ending 31 March 2023 as well as young people who turned 19 years of age during the year ending 31 March 2023 and who had been looked after on 1 April three years previously. It excludes those young people who had been looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (respite care).

Due to the small number of care leavers in Northern Ireland, some caution should be taken when interpreting figures presented in this bulletin, especially when the figures are broken down into sub categories. It is also worth noting, when comparing yearly figures, that each year has an individual cohort of young people which may differ in characteristics to other years. For example, a given year may include a higher number of young people with special educational needs which could impact on the educational attainment figures for that year. As such, yearly variations in outcomes may be a reflection on the different cohorts of people in addition to actual trends or social care intervention.

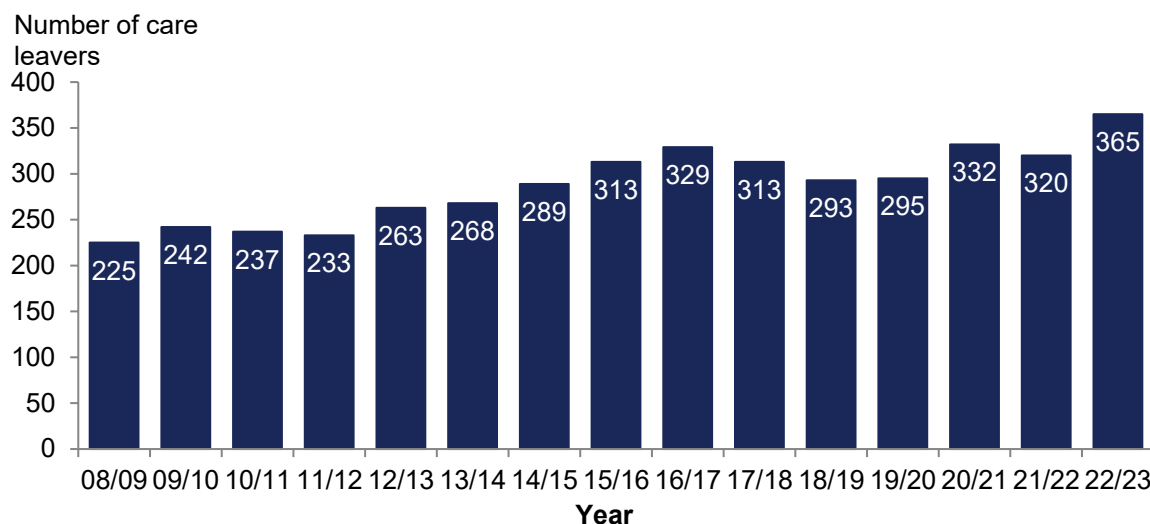
2. Care leavers aged 16 to 18

2.1. WHO ARE THE CARE LEAVERS AGED 16 TO 18?

During the year ending 31 March 2023, 365 young people aged 16 to 18 left care in Northern Ireland. The number of care leavers steadily increased between 2011/12 and 2016/17, after a period of relative stability in the preceding years and has stayed around 300 the last years, however 2022/23 saw an increase of 14% from 2021/22 (320).

There was a higher proportion of males compared to female care leavers in 2022/23 (54% and 46% respectively). This breakdown is slightly higher than the general population of that age group in Northern Ireland, (49% female and 51% male)³.

Figure 1 Number of care leavers aged 16 to 18 in Northern Ireland (2008/09 – 2022/23)



³ Population aged 16-18 years, Mid Year Population Estimate 2022 (NISRA 2023).

Table 1. Care leavers aged 16 to 18 by Health and Social Care Trust (2022/23)

HSC Trust	Number of care leavers	Numbers change from last year	Proportion of all care leavers in NI
Belfast HSC Trust	83	-6	23%
Northern HSC Trust	70	-2	19%
South Eastern HSC Trust	69	18	19%
Southern HSC Trust	68	15	19%
Western HSC Trust	75	20	21%
Northern Ireland	365	45	100%

As in previous years, Belfast Health Social Care (HSC) Trust had the highest number of care leavers aged 16 to 18 (23%). The number of care leavers in each HSC Trust can vary year on year, this year the South Eastern, Southern and Western HSC Trusts saw increases in the number of care leavers when compared to the previous year, whereas Belfast and Northern HSC Trusts had similar numbers (see Table 1).

The care leaver's individual geographical location was linked with the [Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017](#)⁴ to identify the deprivation quintile rank of home location before last entry into care and after leaving care⁵. For the young people where geographical information was available⁶, a slightly smaller proportion had been living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland before the last entry into care (41%) than after leaving care (43%). Further analysis showed that over half (59%) of the care leavers were living in an area of same deprivation rank when leaving care as before last entry into care.

2.1.1. Age Profile

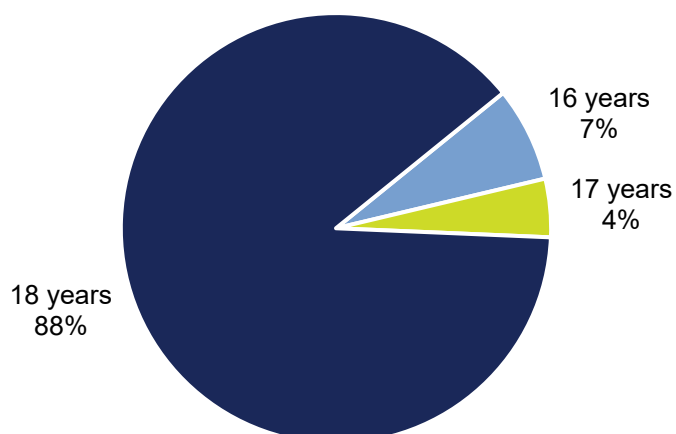
As in previous years, the majority of care leavers in 2022/23 had stayed in care until they reached the age of 18 years of age (88%), while some 12% left care at 16 or 17 years of age. At HSC Trust level, there was some variation in the age profile of the care leavers, with the proportion of young people leaving care at 18 ranging from 82% in the Southern HSC Trusts to 94% in the Belfast HSC Trusts.

⁴ Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017.

⁵ These analyses were only carried out for care leavers with Northern Ireland geographical location.

⁶ Northern Ireland geographical information prior to entering care was available for 91% of the care leavers and information was available for 85% upon leaving care. Information was supplied for 79% of the care leavers for both prior to entering care and after leaving care.

Figure 2 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Age of care leavers (2022/23)



2.1.2. Religion and Ethnicity

Information on religion and ethnicity of care leavers is collected for equality monitoring purposes. There were lower numbers of care leavers from a Protestant community background (35%) than a Catholic community background (41%) in 2022/23, with 9% originating from Muslim community background and a further 15% from 'Other' denominations, including those with no religion, or whose religion was unknown.

The vast majority of care leavers in 2022/23 had a White ethnic background (80%)⁷. The proportion of non-white care leavers was generally less than 5% in the years leading up to 2018/19 but has since increased, and was 17% in 2022/23. Of those with non-white ethnic background in 2022/23, 10% were Black, 1% were mixed ethnicities, and the remaining 5% were of other ethnic backgrounds.

2.1.3. Disability

Having a disability can have an impact upon a person's life chances. People with disabilities can suffer from multiple disadvantages, being more likely to live in poverty, less likely to have educational qualifications and more likely to be economically inactive. Of the care leavers in 2022/23, 21% (77) had a disability. Of these, over half (52%, 40 young people) had a learning disability and 18 were on the autistic spectrum⁸.

There are no directly comparable disability figures for this age group for all of Northern Ireland, however; the 2021 Census⁹ reported that 11% of 16-18 year olds had health problems limiting day-to-day activities a little, and 4% had health problems limited day-to-day activities a lot. Furthermore, 7% of 16 and 17 year olds received a Personal Independence

⁷ Excludes 12 young people where the information was not recorded.

⁸ Please note that some of the children had multiple disabilities. For example, a small number of the children with a learning disability may also have autism.

⁹ [2021 Census | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk)

Payment in August 2023¹⁰. These comparisons continue to suggest that a disproportionate number of young care leavers are living with disabilities.

2.1.4. Special Educational Need

Children have special educational needs if they have a difficulty which calls for specific educational provision to be made for them. Further definitional and background information on this is detailed on the [Department of Education for Northern Ireland website](#).

Just over a fifth (22%) of care leavers in 2022/23 had a statement of Special Educational Need while in school. Although not directly comparable, 7% of school leavers in Northern Ireland had a statement of Special Educational Need in 2021/2022¹¹. This suggests that a disproportionate number of young care leavers have specific educational needs compared with the general population.

¹⁰ Figures supplied by the Department for Communities (Data source: PSU PIP live load scan at 31st August 2023). Personal Independence Payment is a new benefit replacing Disability Living Allowance. Population figure: [2022 Mid-Year Population Estimates for Northern Ireland | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](#)

¹¹ DENI, [School leavers | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#).

2.2. WHAT WAS THEIR LAST PERIOD IN CARE?

2.2.1. Legal Status

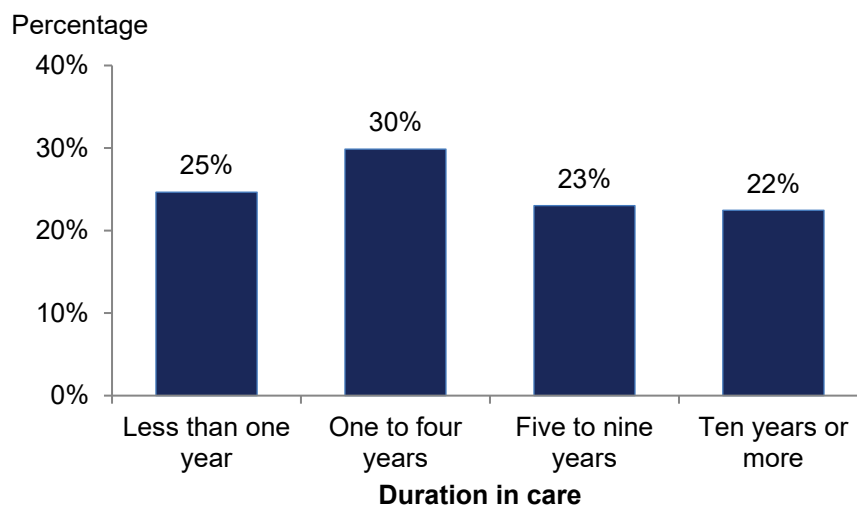
The legal status¹² of care leavers aged 16 to 18 prior to leaving care was a Care Order for 55% of the young people and 40% were Accommodated (Article 21). The remaining 5% of care leavers had other legal statuses including Interim Care Orders while in care.

2.2.2. Length of Most Recent Period in Care

Every child's care history is unique and some children may experience more than one episode of care. For this publication, only information on the duration of the last period of care is collected.

Over half (55%) of care leavers had been looked after for less than five years in their last period of care, and some 22% had been looked after for more than ten years. On average, females last period of care was slightly longer (5 years 9 months) than males (5 years 7 months).

Figure 3 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Length of most recent period of care (2022/23)

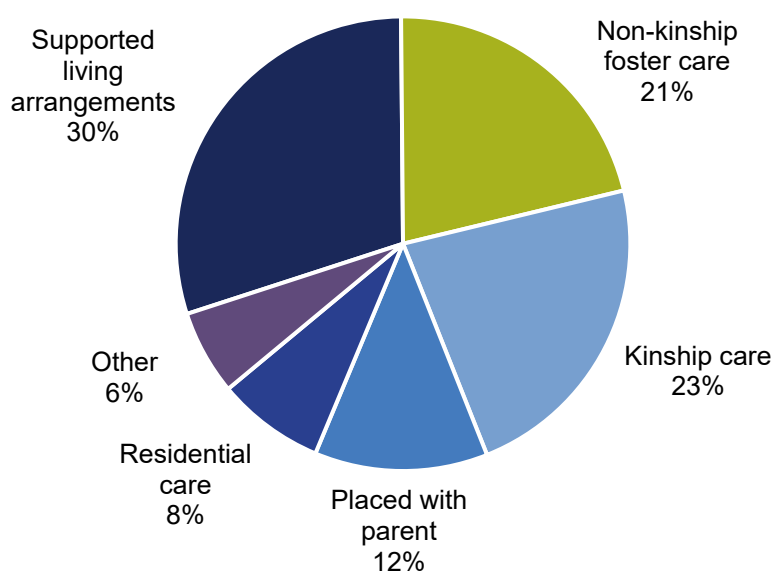


¹² Definitions of the different legal statuses are set out in Appendix B.

2.2.3. Last Placement

As in previous years, the majority of care leavers in 2022/23 had been in foster care prior to leaving care (44%); 23% in kinship foster care (placed with relatives or a person known to the child) and 21% in non-kinship foster care¹³. A further 30% had been in some form of supported lodging/living arrangements¹⁴, and a further 12% had been placed with a parent or person with parental responsibilities. Some 8% had been in residential care and 6% had been in 'other' placement types which included placements such as prison, bed & breakfast, and friends.

Figure 4 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Last placement type (2022/23)



Young people who had been in care for five years or longer were more likely to have been in non-kinship foster care or placed with a parent before leaving care, whereas young people in care for less than five years were more likely to be in a form of supported lodging/living arrangements. Please note that the young person may have had one or several placement changes during the time in care and these figures only reflect the last of their placements before leaving care.

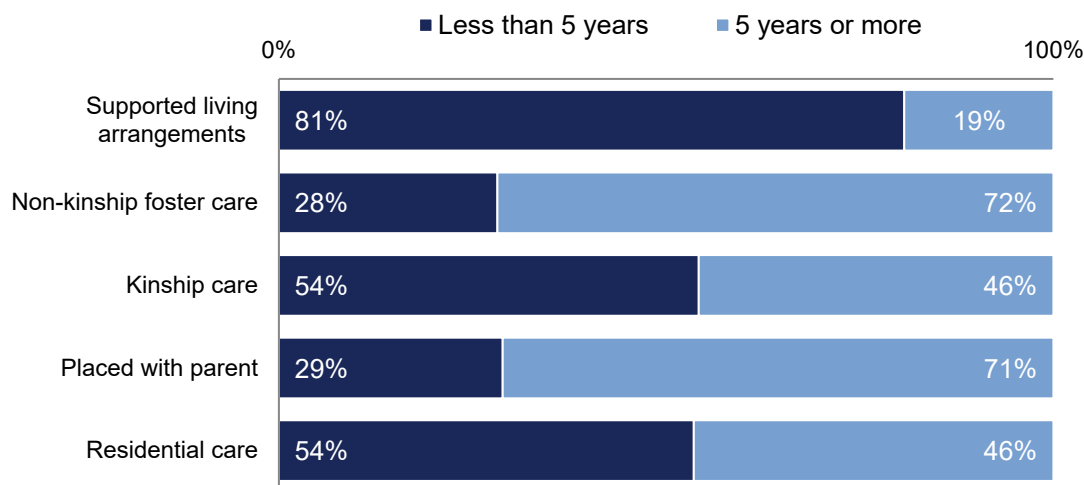
¹³ Please see appendix B for placement definitions.

¹⁴ These may in previous years have been included as 'independent living with formal support'.

Figure 5 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Last placement by time in care (2022/23)

Note 1: The young person may have had one or several placement changes during the time in care and these figures only reflect the last of their placements before leaving care.

Note 2: 'Other placements' is excluded from this breakdown due to small numbers.

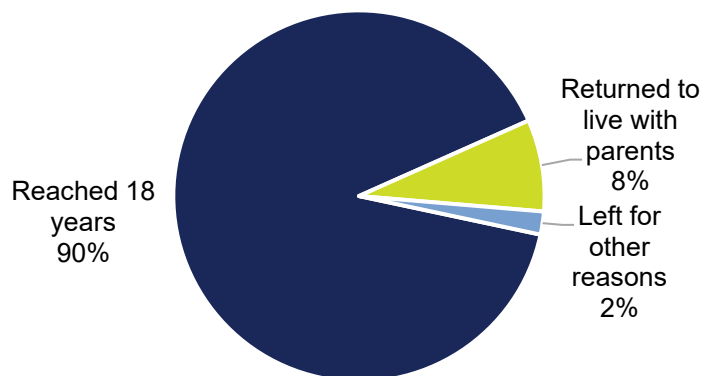


2.2.4. Reasons for Leaving Care

Of the 365 care leavers aged 16 - 18 years in 2022/23, the majority (90%) left care because they had reached 18 years of age, with the remaining 10% leaving to return home to live with parents or relatives, transferred to care of adult services, or other reasons.

The majority of those who left care aged 16 or 17 returned to the care of their parents or legal guardians. This age group's last period of care was typically shorter, with an average duration of 2 year and 2 months. Those who left care due to reaching the age of 18 years had on average a last period of care lasting 5 years 6 months. This may indicate that those who leave care prior to turning 18 may be a cohort of children with different care needs to those who stay in care until they reach adulthood.

Figure 6 Care leavers aged 16-18 – Reason care ceased (2022/23)



2.3. HOW ARE THEY DOING NOW?

2.3.1. Current Accommodation

After leaving care, 30% of the care leavers aged 16 - 18 were still living with their former foster carers (kinship and non-kinship) as part of a GEM placement arrangement¹⁵. Some 17% were living with their parents and 24% were living in some form of supported lodging or accommodation. A further 12% were living with friends or family and 9% were living independently. The remaining 9% were divided between community homes, in custody, homeless, other, or unknown accommodation.

2.3.2. Educational Attainment

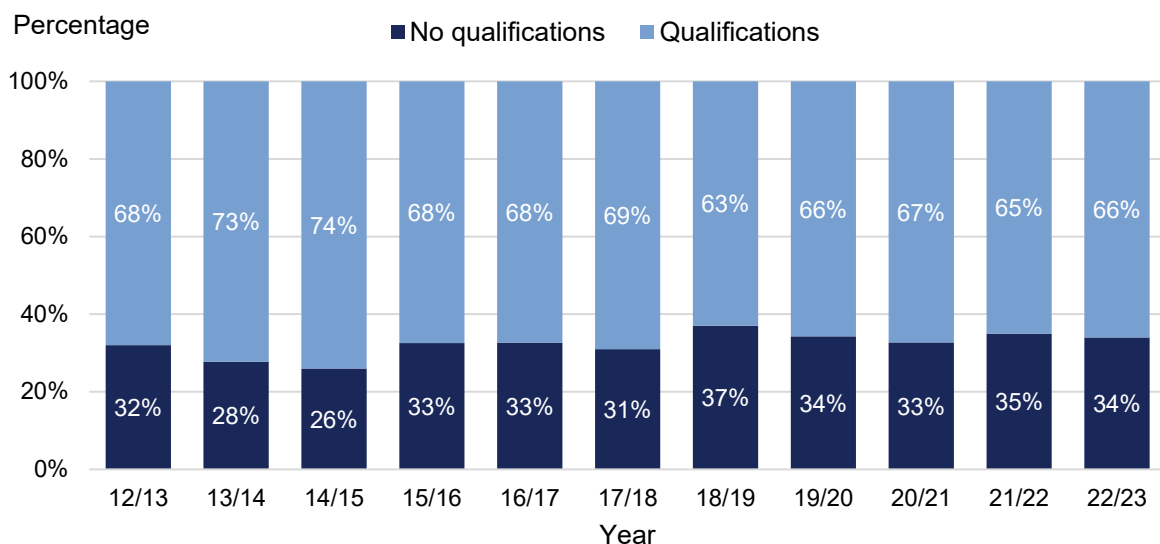
Educational attainment can be an important predictor of success in later life; low educational achievements may impact on future lives and chances for employment.

At the time of leaving care, two-thirds (66%, 220 young people) of the care leavers aged 16 - 18 had educational qualifications; whilst 34% of the care leavers did not have any qualifications at the time of leaving care (112 young people)¹⁶.

As the characteristics of the cohort of care leavers can vary each year, the educational outcomes may also vary. Some annual variation can be seen in care leavers' qualifications; however, the general trend has remained the same over the last years.

Figure 7 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Care leavers educational qualifications at time of leaving care (2012/13 – 2022/23)

Note: Excludes 33 care leavers who either had severe learning disability or no recorded information.



¹⁵ The *Going the Extra Mile* scheme was launched in 2006 and aims to promote continuity and stability in post care life for young people living with foster carers and who are in education.

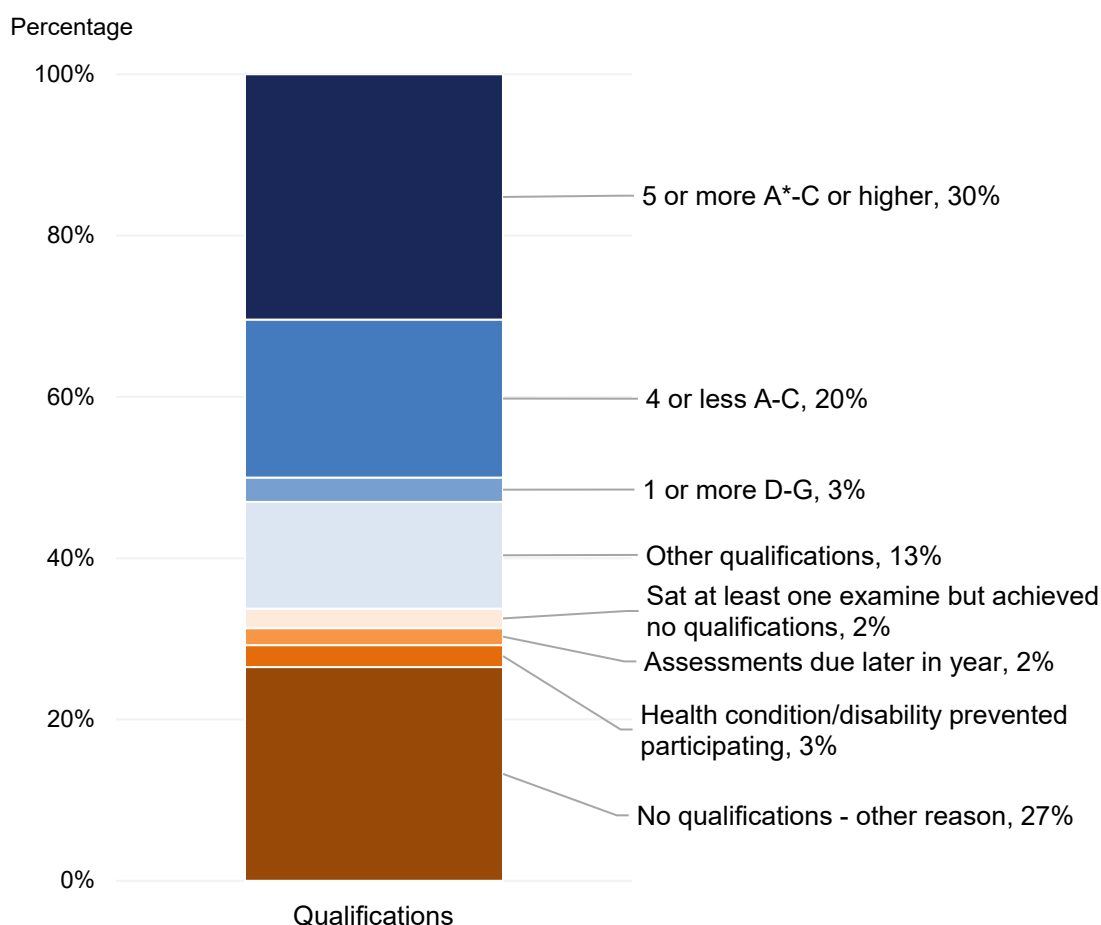
¹⁶ Figures exclude 33 care leavers who either had severe learning difficulties or no recorded information.

The 34% with no qualifications in 2022/23 represented 112 care leavers aged 16 - 18. Some 88 of these did not sit any examinations, even though they had reached an appropriate age to do so¹⁷. Eight young people sat examinations but did not obtain any qualifications, and seven were due to take examinations after leaving care. A further 9 young people had health conditions or disabilities preventing them from sitting exams (see figure below).

Figure 8 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Care leavers’ educational qualifications at time of leaving care (2022/23)

Note: Excludes 33 care leavers who had either severe learning disability or no reported information.

Note: Some young people had both GCSE and other qualifications; these have been grouped in the appropriate GCSE category.



A higher proportion of females left care with qualifications compared with males (72% compared to 61%). Some 36% of females obtained five GCSE’s grades A*-C or higher compared with 26% of males. Some 39% of males and 29% of females left care with no qualifications¹⁸.

¹⁷ This includes unaccompanied minors learning English via ESOL.

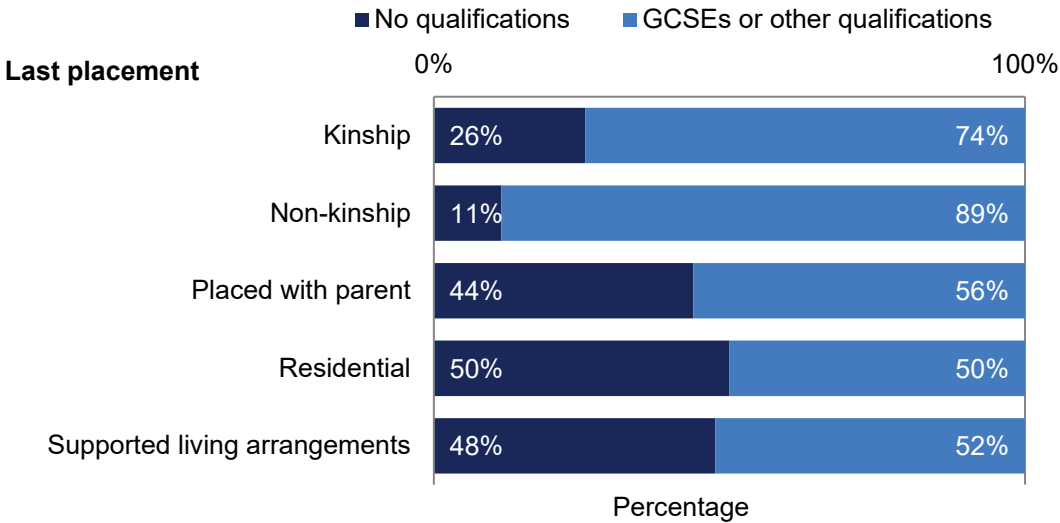
¹⁸ Details are set out in the accompanying [Tables](#).

The following analyses compare those care leavers aged 16 to 18 with GCSE's or other qualifications (220, 66%) and those with no qualifications (112, 34%)¹⁹.

Some 81% of care leavers previously in foster care placements had GCSEs or other qualifications at the time of leaving care (89% non-kinship and 74% kinship). Just over half of those whose last placement was with parents had qualifications (56%), 52% of those living in a supported living arrangement and 50% of those in residential care had GCSEs or other qualifications when leaving care.

Figure 9 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Qualifications achieved by last placement type (2022/23)

Note: Excludes 33 care leavers who either had severe learning disability or no recorded information.

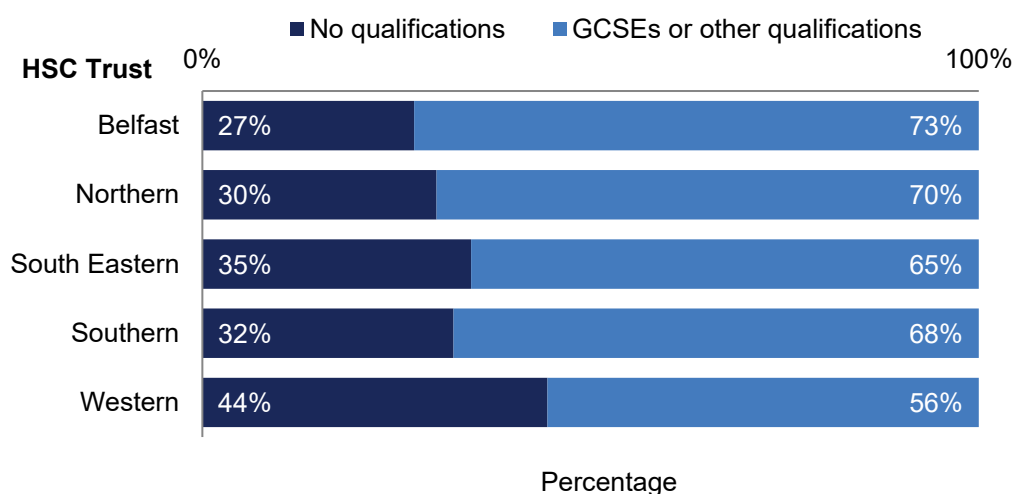


Length of time of the last period of care also appeared to be important in terms of educational attainment. Children in care for five years or more tended to do better academically than those in care for less than five years. Some 84% of care leavers in care for five years or more had obtained GCSE's or other qualifications, compared with 52% of those in care for less than five years. Please note, this difference may be related to different placement types experienced by the age groups of care leavers.

¹⁹ Excludes 33 care leavers who either had severe learning disability or with unknown information.

Figure 10 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Qualification achieved by HSC Trust (2022/23)

Note: Excludes 33 care leavers who either had severe learning disability or no recorded information.



At the time of leaving care, a higher proportion of the 16 - 18 year old care leavers from the Belfast HSC Trust had educational qualifications (73%) compared with the other Trusts. Please note that due to the small numbers involved, these figures are subject to high year on year volatility.

2.3.3. Educational Attainment – Comparison with the general school population

The Department of Education publish annual statistics on qualifications for the general school leaver population in Northern Ireland. These figures are not directly comparable to the care leaver qualifications, as the care leavers information includes all care leavers (whether in education or not) and is captured at the time of leaving care, not when leaving school.

To best match the school leaver population, a sub-cohort of care leavers was created, covering those who **had GCSE qualifications or who sat exams but did not achieve any qualifications (total of 183 young people)**. The qualifications of the sub-cohort has been compared to the school leaver population in the table below.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, some 97% of school leavers achieved at least 5 GCSEs A*-G compared to 73% of care leavers who sat exams. Furthermore, 54% of care leavers achieved 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C compared to 92% of the school leaver population²⁰.

Please note, the above is not a like-for-like comparison, however; it is the best possible match based on the data available.

²⁰ [Qualifications and Destinations of Northern Ireland School Leavers](#), Department of Education NI.

Table 2. Attainment of Care Leavers aged 16 - 18 who had sat exams (2021/22 and 2022/23) and School Leaver (2020/21)

*Excludes care leavers aged 16 to 18 with non-GCSE qualifications (eg NVQs or essential skills); those who did not sit exams due to health conditions, disability or learning disability; those who were due to sit exams after leaving care and those who did not engage in school/education.

**Year 12, 13 or 14 pupils leaving mainstream, grant aided post-primary schools.

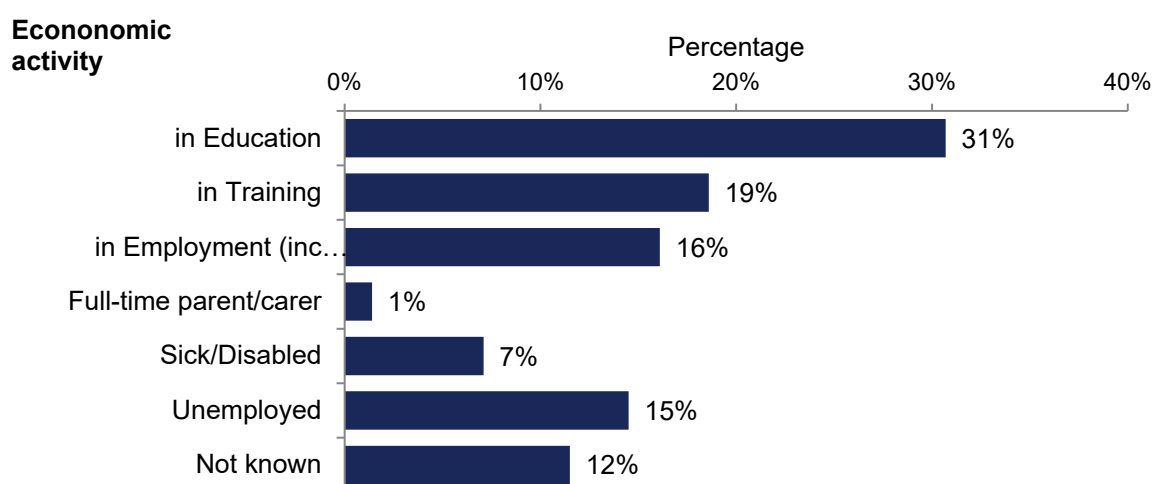
Source: [Department of Education NI](#) .

Qualifications	Care leavers aged 16 - 18 who sat exams* 2021/22	Care leavers aged 16 - 18 who sat exams* 2022/23	School leavers 2021/22**
At least 5 GCSEs A*-G	75.7%	73.2%	96.8%
At least 5 GCSE A*-C	59.2%	53.6%	91.9%
No formal qualifications	4.1%	4.4%	0.8%

2.3.4. Economic Activity

Figure 11 below details economic activity for care leavers aged 16 - 18 years for 2022/23. Most of the young people were in education at the time of leaving care (31%), while 19% were in training and 16% in employment. Some 7% were economically inactive due to sickness or disability, and a further 1% were economically inactive due to caring/parental responsibilities. Most of the 15% who were unemployed when leaving care, were either lacking motivation to engage in education, training or employment, or actively seeking employment. A further 12% of care leavers aged 16 - 18 years had other or unknown activity.

Figure 11 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Economic activity (2022/23)



The findings of this section relate only to those for whom economic activity was reported²¹

Of the 323 care leavers aged 16 - 18 in 2022/23, whose economic activity was reported, 75% were in full time or part time education, training, or employment. Some 16% were unemployed, and 9% were economically inactive because of caring responsibilities or illness/disabilities. The proportion of young people in education or training is substantially larger than the other categories, which has been the trend the last ten years (see tables for details).

Looking at the HSC Trusts individually, in 2022/23, the proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment at the time of leaving care ranged between 62% (South Eastern Trust Trust) and 87% (Belfast Trust). These figures are based on small numbers and tend to vary year on year.

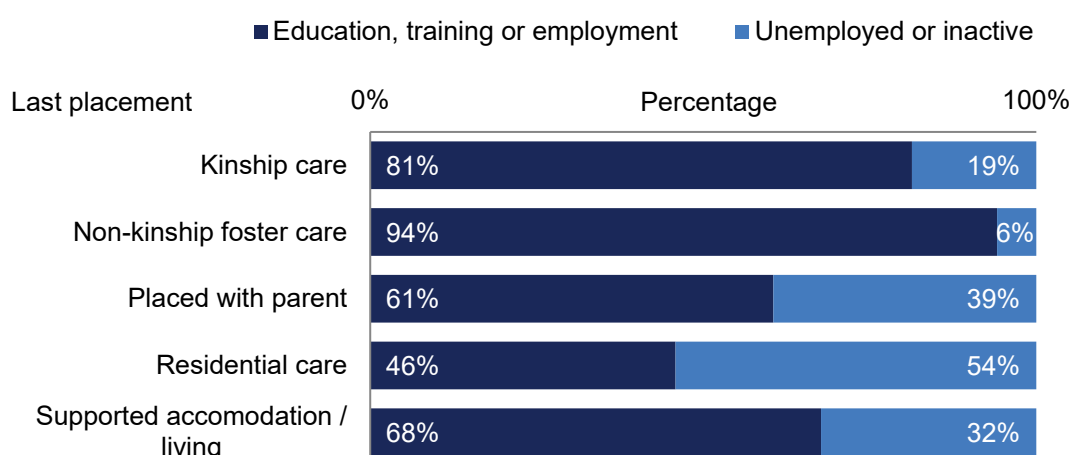
A slightly higher proportion of female care leavers were in education training or employment than male care leavers (75% and 73% respectively).

As can be expected, having qualifications correlated highly with economic activity, with 83% of those with GCSEs or other qualifications in education, training or employment compared with 58% of those without qualifications.

Care leavers whose last placement was foster care (both kinship and non-kinship) fared better in terms of economic activity on leaving care, with 87% in education, training or employment. For all other placement types, the proportion was between 46% and 68% (see figure below). Please note that these analysis include at times very small numbers and figures must therefore be interpreted with care.

Figure 12 Care leavers aged 16 to 18 – Economic activity by latest placement type (2022/23)

Note: Excludes care leavers where economic activity was not known.



²¹ Economic activity was other/not known/not reported for 42 of the care leavers aged 16 - 18 in 2022/23 (12%)

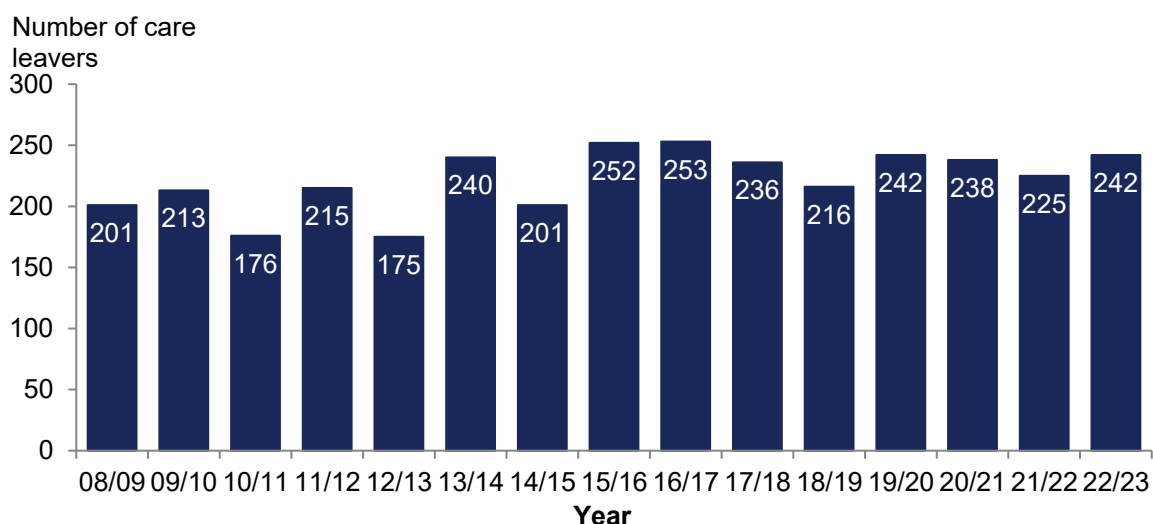
3. Care Leavers Aged 19

3.1. WHO ARE THE CARE LEAVERS AGED 19?

During the year ending 31 March 2023, there were 242 young people in Northern Ireland, who had been in care on 1 April 2020, and who reached their 19th birthday during the year ending 31 March 2023. This was 8% increase from the previous year (225).

Of the 242 care leavers aged 19 in 2022/23, 125 (52%) were male and 117 (48%) were female. This gender split was similar to the general population of that age group in Northern Ireland, where 52% were males and 48% females²².

Figure 13 Number of care leavers aged 19 in Northern Ireland (2008/09 – 2022/23)



²² [Census 2021 main statistics demography tables – age and sex | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/census-2021-main-statistics-demography-tables-age-and-sex-northern-ireland) (NISRA 2022).

Table 3. Care leavers aged 19 by Health and Social Care Trust (2022/23)

HSC Trust	Number of care leavers	Numbers change from last year	Proportion of care leavers
Belfast HSC Trust	66	+18	27%
Northern HSC Trust	52	-1	22%
South Eastern HSC Trust	40	+1	17%
Southern HSC Trust	41	-5	17%
Western HSC Trust	43	+4	18%
Northern Ireland	242	+17	100%

The number of care leavers in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust can fluctuate year on year. In 2022/23, the highest proportion of care leavers aged 19 were in the Belfast HSC Trust (27%) and the smallest proportions were in the South Eastern and Southern HSC Trust's (17% respectively).

The care leaver's individual geographical location was linked with the [Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017](#)²³ to identify the deprivation quintile rank of home location before last entry into care and at age 19²⁴. For the young people where geographical information was available²⁵, a smaller proportion were living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland at age 19 (34%) than just before their last entry into care (39%). Further analysis showed that half (44%) of the care leavers were living in an area of same deprivation rank when leaving care as before last entry into care, 23% were living in an area rated as more deprived and 33% were living in an area rated less deprived.

3.1.1. Religion and Ethnicity

Information on care leaver religion and ethnicity is collected for equality monitoring purposes. In terms of religion, the proportion of care leavers aged 19 from a Catholic community background (49%) was higher than those from a Protestant community background (38%). Some 3% were Muslim and 10% were of 'Unknown', 'None' or 'Other' religious backgrounds.

The vast majority of the care leavers aged 19 had a white ethnic background (88%); however, this figure is somewhat lower than in previous years.

²³ Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2017.

²⁴ These analyses were only carried out for care leavers with a Northern Ireland geographical location.

²⁵ Northern Ireland geographical information prior to entering care was available for 92% of the care leavers and for 77% upon leaving care. Some 73% of the care leavers had Northern Ireland geographical information for both prior to entering care and after leaving care.

3.1.2. *Disability*

Of those care leavers aged 19, 54 had a disability (22%). Some 23 of these had a learning disability. There are no directly comparable disability figures for this age group for all of Northern Ireland, however; the 2021 Census²⁶ reported that 11% of 18-19 year-olds had health problems limiting day-to-day activities a little, and 4% had health problems limited day-to-day activities a lot. This suggests that a disproportionately high number of care leavers have a disability.

²⁶ [2021 Census | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk)

3.2. WHAT WAS THEIR LAST PERIOD IN CARE?

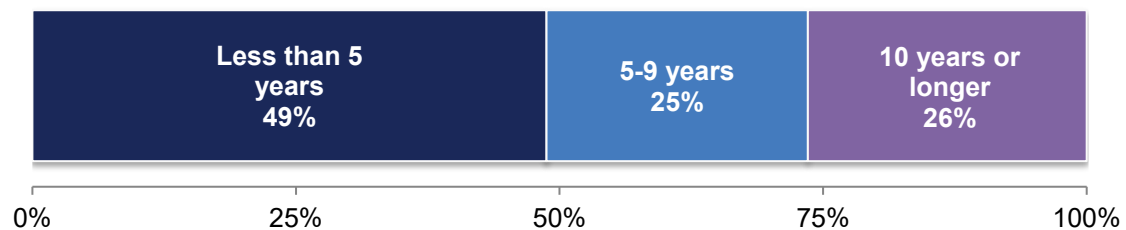
3.2.1. Age when leaving care

The majority of care leavers aged 19 left care on reaching 18 years of age (83%) with 17% leaving at 16 or 17 years of age.

3.2.2. Last period in care

Every child's care history is unique and some children may be in care for only a short period whereas others may be in long-term care for most of their lives. For the care leavers aged 19 in 2022/23, the average length of time in care was 6 years 8 months prior to leaving care which is one months longer than the previous year. In 2022/23, the average last period in care was similar for both females and males (6 years 9 months and 6 years 7 months respectively). Approximately half (49%) of care leavers their last period in care was less than five years, whereas for 26% of care leavers it lasted for ten years or longer.

Figure 14 Care leavers aged 19 – Length of last period of care (2022/23)



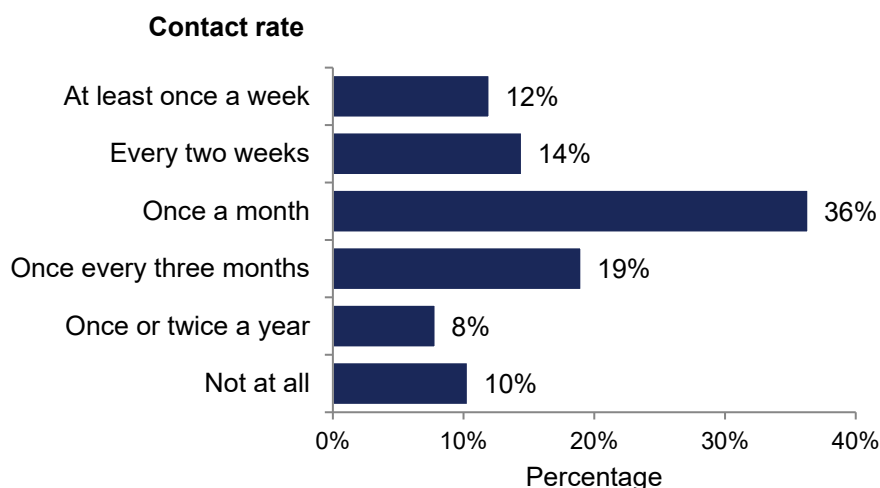
3.3. HOW ARE THEY DOING NOW?

3.3.1. Contact with Social Services

The 'Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002' requires HSC Trusts to take reasonable steps to maintain contact with care leavers. For 2022/23, HSC Trusts reported contacts with 217 (90%) of the care leavers aged 19²⁷. This is an increase of more than 18 percentage points since 2003/04²⁸ when the contact rate was 72%. In 2022/23 Social Services were in contact with 63% of the care leavers at least once a month, similar to the previous year (65%%).

Figure 15 Care Leavers aged 19 – Contact Rates by Frequency of Contact (2022/23)

Note: 'Not at all' includes a small number of young people not residents in UK or who are deceased.



Northern Ireland contact rates have in recent years been higher than that of local authorities' contact rates with care leavers aged 19 in England, however for 2022/23, the rate in England was five percentage points higher than in Northern Ireland, at 95%.

²⁷ Those not in contact with HSC Trusts include a small number of young people who were no longer residents in UK or who were deceased.

²⁸ [Former Care Leavers in Northern Ireland 2003/04](#), DHSSPS 2006.

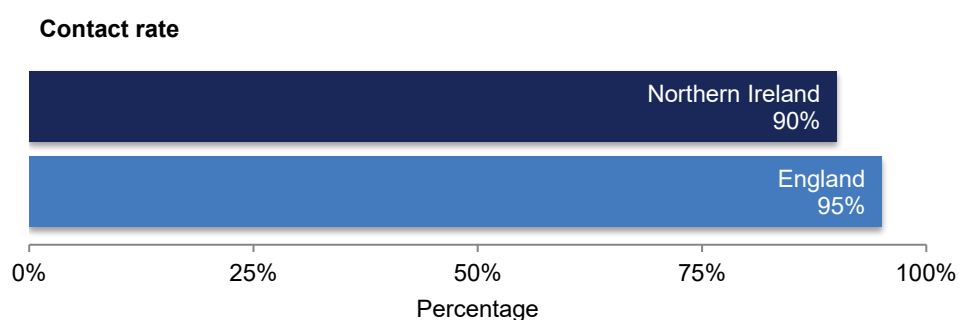
Figure 16 Care leaver aged 19 - Contact rate by region (2022/23)

Source: Northern Ireland: OC3 returns 2022/23

Source: England: [Children looked after in England including adoptions, reporting year 2023](#)

Note: Figures for young people in which there is no information have been counted as 'not in touch' for England. This includes those young people with whom the local authority is not in touch, young people who have refused contact with the local authority and young people who no longer require services.

Note: For Northern Ireland, those not in contact with HSC Trusts included a small number of young people not residents in UK or deceased.



All information below in the sections 3.3.2 – 3.3.5, in regards to support from social services, accommodation, dependents, and economic activity of care leavers aged 19, relates to 217 care leavers who had been in contact with social services during the twelve months prior to their 19th birthday.

3.3.2. Support from Social Services

Of the care leavers who had been in contact with social services in the year leading up to their 19th birthday, some 151 (71%) were receiving some form of ongoing support from social services^{29,30}, a slightly lower proportion than the previous year (79%). Of those young people receiving support, 88 (41%) were receiving a form of financial support, for accommodation, education, or other expenses, or a combination of these³¹. Some 61 young people (40%) were receiving support for a 'Going the Extra Mile' (GEM) placement³².

A lower proportion of males than females were receiving support from social services after leaving care (64% and 75% respectively). Care leavers who had been in care over ten years were more likely to be receiving support (79%) than in care for a shorter time (66%).

²⁹ Excludes care leavers who died before their 19th birthday and those not in contact with social services, and those with unknown information.

³⁰ Care leavers may be receiving more than one service.

³¹ Other financial support can be for travel, groceries, leisure etc.

³² The Going the Extra Mile scheme was launched in 2006 and aims to promote continuity and stability in post care life for young people living with foster carers.

Table 4. Care leavers aged 19 – Support from Social Services (2022/23)

Note 1: Care leavers may receive more than one service.

Note 2: Based on 217 care leavers in contact with social services around their 19th birthday.

Type of support	Number of care leavers
Financial support for accommodation	15
Financial support for higher education	18
Financial support other (eg towards travel, groceries, leisure etc.)	72
GEM placement	61
Mental health services / therapeutic support	9
Other	24

3.3.3. Accommodation

Care leavers were living in a variety of types of accommodation on their 19th birthday. Almost a third (32%) were living with their former foster carers in a GEM arrangement. Some 29% were living with either their parents, other family or friends. Some 14% of care leavers were living in independent accommodation, while 10% were living in various forms of supported living / accommodation^{33, 34}.

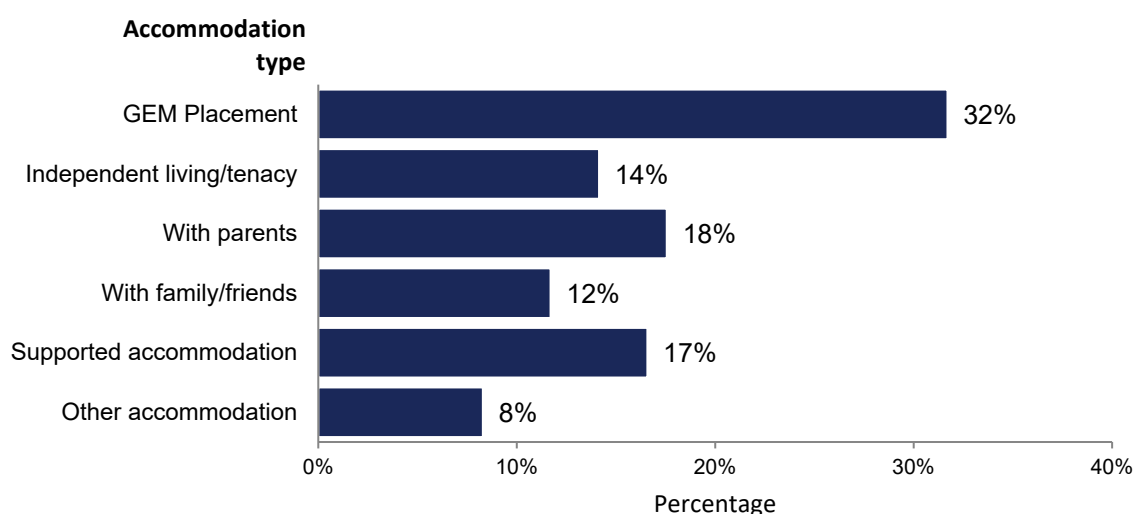
³³ “Supported living / accommodation” will here include semi-independent transitional accommodation, supported/host family lodging and Young Adult Supported Accommodation Project.

³⁴ Figures relate to those care leavers in contact with their HSC Trust.

Figure 17 Care leavers aged 19 – Type of accommodation (2022/23)

Note 1: Excludes care leavers who were not in contact with their HSC Trust.

Note 2: Supported accommodation includes semi-independent transitional accommodation, supported/host family lodging and Young Adult Supported Accommodation Project.



3.3.4. Dependants

A smaller proportion of care leavers aged 19 were parents in 2022/23 than in previous years; some 13 young women and men (6%), compared with 26 the previous year (13%).³⁵ Please note that it's not unusual for the proportion with dependent children within this cohort to fluctuate year on year.

In 2022/23, 10% of female care leavers aged 19 became mothers on or before their 19th birthday. During 2022, less than 1% of 15 to 19 year old females in the general population in Northern Ireland became mothers³⁶. Although these figures are not directly comparable, it does indicate a higher prevalence of teenage mothers in the cohorts of care leavers.

3.3.5. Economic Activity

All information below referring to the economic activity of care leavers aged 19, relates to 205 care leavers who had been in contact with social services during the twelve months prior to their 19th birthday, and whose economic activity was known³⁷.

Of the care leavers aged 19 in 2022/23, whose economic activity was known, 67 (33%) were in full or part-time education, 33 (16%) were in full or part-time training³⁸ and 40 (20%) were

³⁵ Note: This relates only to those young people with whom the HSC Trusts were in contact with and excludes those with unknown information.

³⁶ Source: [Registrar General Annual Report 2021 Births](#), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2022 – Note: may include some young mothers under the age of 15: [Mid-Year Population Estimates 2021](#) (NISRA 2022).

³⁷ Excludes 37 young people not in contact with the HSC Trust; who had died before their 19th birthday or whose economic activity information was not completed/not known.

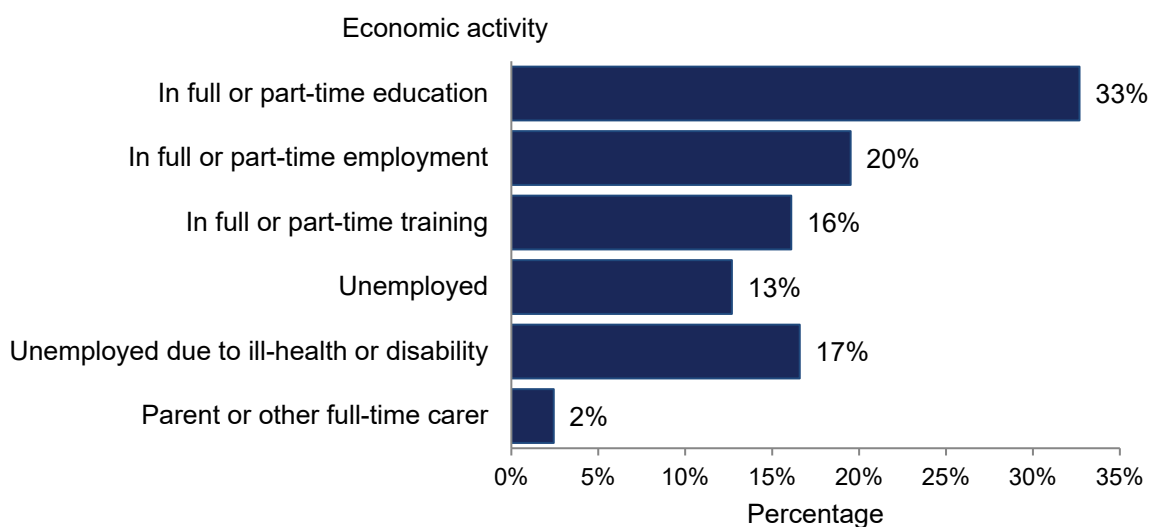
³⁸ "Training" may include a small number of non-Governmental training programmes.

in full or part-time employment³⁹. Of those care leavers in education, 23 were in higher education⁴⁰.

Just under a third (32%) of the care leavers were economically inactive; 26 from being unemployed (12%); 34 were economically inactive due to ill health or a disability (16%); and 5 were full time carers (2%).

Figure 18 Care leavers aged 19 – Proportion of care leavers by economic activity 2022/23

Excludes 30 young people not in contact with the HSC Trust, who had died before their 19th birthday or whose activity information was not completed.

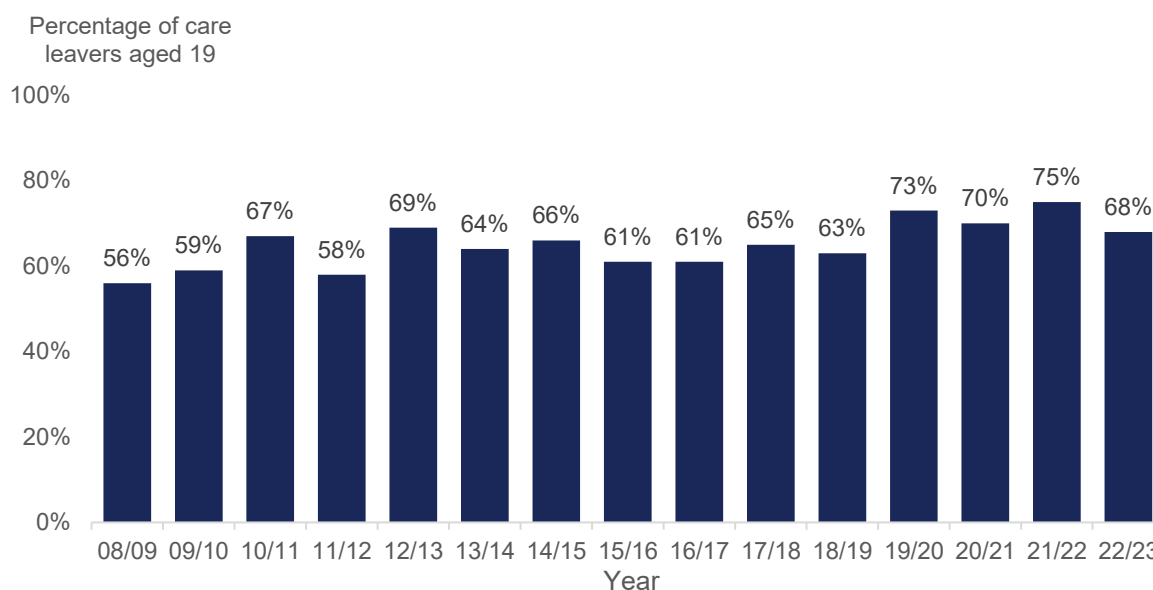


³⁹ Some full time employment includes planned training.

⁴⁰ Higher education is defined as studies beyond A Level, leading to a degree or higher qualification, including diplomas in higher education, teaching and nursing qualifications, HNDs, ONDs and BTEC. This includes full-time and part-time study if it is considered the main activity.

Figure 19 Care leavers aged 19 – Proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment (2008/09 – 2022/23)

Excludes young people not in contact with the HSC Trust, who had died before their 19th birthday or whose activity information was not completed.



In 2022/23, 68% of all care leavers aged 19 were in education, training, or employment. This was lower than in 2021/22, when 75% were economically active. It was however higher than in England, where 63% of 19-year-old care leavers in contact with social services were in education, training or employment⁴¹.

A higher proportion of females (71%) than males (65%) care leavers aged 19 were in education, training, or employment in 2022/23.

A care leaver is categorised as economically inactive if they are not in employment, training, or education due to caring responsibilities or disability. Therefore, it can be expected that a lower proportion of care leavers in those cohorts are economically active. In 2022/23, 41% of those with a disability (e.g. learning or physical disability) were in education⁴², training or employment; substantially lower than those without a disability (76%). Of the 13 care leavers with dependent children, 5 (38%) were in education, training or employment. Please note that due to small numbers of care leavers with dependants and with disabilities, these figures may be subject to high year on year volatility.

In the Northern, South Eastern, and Southern HSC Trust's, the proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment ranged between 70% and 76%. The proportion in Belfast and Western HSC Trust's was lower at 61% and 67% respectively. It is however worth mentioning that the Belfast and Western HSC Trust had a higher proportion of young people unemployed due to ill health, disability or being a carer than the other Trusts. Furthermore, please note, the number of care leavers in each Trust is small, therefore, large year on year variability may occur (see Tables for details).

⁴¹ [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2022 to 2023](#)

⁴² Young people attending special schools is categorised as in education.

In previous years, there has been a marked difference in young people in education, training or employment and the time they had spent in care; however last year (2020/21), this difference was less marked. The trend seen in years previous to 2021 was observed again this year with some 63% of those in care for less than five years in education, training or employment compared with 73% of young people who had been in care for five years or longer.

3.3.6. *NEET*

The term NEET refers to young people not in education, employment or training. The term was first used in the 1990s and is now in common use. Calculating NEET is dependent on the information sources available. As such, there may be some difference, for example, between NEET figures for Northern Ireland in general and that of care leavers in this survey.

In this data collection, care leavers who are NEET refers to those who were not in part- or full-time education, training⁴³ or employment. Those care leavers whose activity was not known were excluded from the calculations. In general, care leavers defined as NEET were either economically inactive due to illness/disability or full time caring responsibilities, or they were unemployed. In 2022/23, 32% of care leavers aged 19 were NEET.

⁴³ May include a small number of non-Government supported training programmes.

Appendix A Technical Notes

Care Leaver Statistics for Northern Ireland

Statistics on care leavers have previously been published in two separate publications; “Care leavers Aged 16-18 in Northern Ireland” and “Care Leavers Aged 19 in Northern Ireland”. Due to the similarities of topic and to allow for better use of resources producing the publications, these two publications were merged to the bulletin “Northern Ireland Care Leavers” in 2013/14. Historic publications on care leavers in Northern Ireland can be downloaded from the [Department of Health’s \(DoH\) website](#).

OC1 and OC3 Returns

The information presented in this bulletin derives from the fourteenth OC1 information collection of care leavers aged 16 to 18 in Northern Ireland and the thirteenth OC3 information collection of care leaves at the age of 19. These information returns were provided by each of the five Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts in Northern Ireland to Community Information Branch (CIB) in the DoH.

OC1 and OC3, together with its companion return OC2 (children in care for 12 months or longer at 30 September), provide a comprehensive series of data on looked after children in Northern Ireland. It is a stated aim of DoH to improve outcomes for children in care, by improving the quality and stability of placements and improving educational opportunities for young people as they make the transition to adulthood. These publications help to measure the Department’s progress in meeting these stated aims.

The OC1 return, introduced in 2002, reports the circumstances of young people at 31 March aged 16 to 18 who had left care during the previous financial year. It collects a range of information, including educational achievement, economic activity, disability, duration in care and placement prior to leaving care.

The OC3 return, introduced in 2004, reports the circumstances of care leavers at the time of their 19th birthday. It collects information on frequency of contacts with social services, economic activity and accommodation.

To help put some figures within their wider social context, comparative information with, for example, the general school population and looked after children in other countries in the United Kingdom have been included where possible. Users of these statistics find such comparisons interesting; though it should be stressed that they are not like-for-like comparisons and may merely reflect differences between different cohorts of children.

Data Collection

The returns used to collect this information has one record for each young person fitting the parameters of the collection. The returns are completed online by nominated HSC Trust staff using a secure web-based application. All records are pseudo-anonymised to protect the confidentiality of these young people.

For inclusion in OC1, care leavers had to be aged 16 to 18 years when leaving care and left care during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. The information collected related to the last period in care.

The OC3 return relates to care leavers at the time of their 19th birthday. It provides data on all care leavers at age 19, who had been looked after on 1 April, three years previously.

All references made to 'Year' refer to the financial year, 1 April to 31 March, i.e. for the 2022/23 collection the reference period was 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

Guidance notes and other documents associated with the completion of the OC surveys are available to view or download from the [DoH website](#).

Rounding/Disclosure Conventions

Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers and as a consequence some percentages may not sum to 100. It has been necessary to suppress other figures whenever it would be possible to calculate the value of a suppressed number by means of simple arithmetic. The rule applied in these circumstances has been to suppress the next smallest data item.

Data Quality

All information submitted by HSC Trusts was validated at the point of entry. Community Information Branch, within DoH, perform further checks, using historical data to monitor annual variations and emerging trends.

A National Statistics Publication

The United Kingdom Statistics Authority has accredited these statistics as [National Statistics](#), in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Once statistics have been accredited as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed. [Report 265](#) is the most recent assessment of these statistics.

User feedback

If you have any comments on this publication, please contact:

Community Information Branch

Department of Health

Annexe 2, Castle Buildings

Stormont, BT4 3SQ

Email: cib@health-ni.gov.uk

Tel: 028 90522580

Related Publications

Details of statistics on looked after children published by other countries in the UK (United Kingdom) can be found as detailed below.

Scotland

[Children's Social Work Statistics](#)

Wales

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services>

England

[Children looked after in England including adoption](#)

Other statistics produced by the DoH relating to looked after children and other areas of children's social care with relevant web links are detailed below:

Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/childrens-social-care-statistics-northern-ireland>

Children in Care in Northern Ireland

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/looked-after-children>

Child Protection Register

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/child-protection-register>

Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/children-adopted-care>

Appendix B Definitions

Placement

Foster care is when a child is placed by a Trust, or by its parents (or those with parental responsibility), with other persons who will care for, and rear the child. Foster Carers are approved by a Health and Social Care Trust and receive an allowance for their caring responsibilities from the approving Trust.

Kinship foster care (approved) is when a looked after child is placed by a Trust with a relative, friend, or other person with a prior connection to the child, who will care for and rear the child. A person with a prior connection could be someone who knows the child in a professional capacity such as a childminder, a teacher, or a youth worker, although these are not exclusive categories. Kinship Foster Carers are approved by a Health and Social Care Trust and receive an allowance for their caring responsibilities from the approving Trust.

Placed for adoption refers to a child that has been approved to be adopted and is placed with their prospective adoptive parents pending affirmation from the courts. It can be distinguished between children who are placed for adoption with their former foster carers and those who are placed for adoption with 'others' (not former foster carers).

Residential care is when a looked after child is placed by a Trust in a Children's Home. Residential care for children/Children's Homes are there to ensure that the needs of children are met when they cannot live with their own family. They are a place for children to develop and grow, as well as providing food, shelter, and space for play and leisure in a caring environment. Children's Homes look after children with many different needs.

Secure accommodation is provided for children on a short term basis when it is likely that the child, in any other setting, will injure him/herself or abscond and is likely to suffer significant harm when absconding.

Placed with parent (in previous publications called "Placed with Family") refers to children for whom a Care Order exists and who are placed with their parents, a person who is not a parent but who has parental responsibility for the child or where a child is in care and there was a residence order in force with respect to him/her immediately before the care order was made, and who are placed with a person in whose favour the residence order was made.

Emergency foster care is when a looked after child is placed by a social worker in an emergency (short term) arrangement, for example emergency kinship foster care. Emergency kinship foster carers would normally not have been previously approved by a Health and Social Care Trust as foster carers.

Independent living arrangements refers to children placed in independent accommodation. This would refer to young people between 16 to 18 years old. Independent living arrangements can further be categorised into with or without formal support from Trust.

Supported Lodgings / STAY (Supported Transition & Accommodation for Young people) is accommodation provided in the home of an approved individual or family, known as a 'host' who offers a safe and secure home for young people in care. These young people are aged from 16 to 21 years and are not quite ready to live on their own.

Other placements refers to any placement reported that are not covered by other categories given. This may include children in assessment centres, boarding schools etc, and also

special arrangements relating to a Trust. The categories included may change from year to year.

Legal Status

The legal framework for compulsory intervention in the care and upbringing of children. If more than one legal status is indicated or in force for the child at 31 March, the latest one only is recorded.

Emergency Protection Order (Article 63 & 64): An Emergency Protection Order (EPO) is intended for use in urgent cases to protect a child in the short-term. Almost anyone with a concern can apply for an EPO, although in most circumstances a Trust will seek one. Where the applicant is a Trust or the

NSPCC they must show that in the course of fulfilling their duty to investigate they are being unreasonably frustrated in gaining access to the child. Anyone else applying for an EPO they must show that the child is likely to suffer significant harm unless removed to, or allowed to remain, in a safe place.

An EPO lasts for eight days but can be extended on one occasion for a further seven days. An application to discharge the order cannot be made within the first 72 hours giving a Trust sometime to decide what actions to take in respect of the child. The person to whom the order is addressed also gains parental responsibility for the child for the duration of the order.

Accommodated (Article 21): Children with this legal status have been accommodated by a HSC Trust if there is no one who has parental responsibility for them, they have been lost or abandoned or if the person who has been caring for them has been prevented, for whatever reason, from providing them with suitable accommodation or care. Children are often accommodated with the permission of their parents.

Care Order (Article 50 or 59): A Care Order accords the HSC Trust parental responsibility and allows for the child to be removed from the parental home. This does not extinguish the parental responsibility of the child's parents but means that they cannot exercise this responsibility while the Care Order is in place. For a Court to make a Care Order it must be satisfied that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm and that the harm or likelihood of harm is attributable to the care given to the child, or likely to be given to the child, not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give or the child being beyond parental control.

Interim Care Orders (Article 57): An Interim Care Order is put in place following an adjournment of proceedings for a Care Order or in any family proceedings in which a Court orders a Trust to investigate the circumstances of a child. An Interim Care Order can be in place for up to eight weeks initially and for a further four weeks upon renewal and subsequent occasions that Court deems an Interim Order necessary.

Supervision Order: This order requires the Trust to advise, assist and befriend the supervised child and can only be granted if the same threshold conditions that apply for Care Orders are met. This Order does not give the Trust parental responsibility. It does allow a social worker to issue directions about the child's upbringing including place of residence and involvement in certain programmes. Schedule 3 of the Children Order sets out the full range of matters that may be addressed in a Supervision Order.

Interim Supervision Orders (Article 57): An Interim Supervision can be put in place following an adjournment of proceedings for a Supervision Order or in any family proceedings in which a question arises with respect to the welfare of any child, it appears to the court that it may be appropriate for a supervision order to be made with respect to him, the court may direct the appropriate authority to undertake an investigation of the child's circumstances.

Appendix C List of Tables

The tables are available in excel format on the [DoH website](#).

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Table 1:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Profile by gender, age, religion, ethnicity, disability and special educational needs
Table 2:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Last Placement Type
Table 3:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Length of Time in Care
Table 4:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Reasons for Leaving Care
Table 5:	Care leavers aged 16 – 18: Educational Attainment
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Table 17:	Care leavers aged 19: Accommodation by Gender
Table 18:	Care leavers aged 19: Support from Social Services
Table 19:	Care leavers aged 19: Health & Social Care Trust

This statistical bulletin and other statistical bulletins published by Community Information Branch are available to download from the [Department of Health website](#)