

Review of Nasc's Separated Children's Programme 2012 – 2014

Summary

The Separated Children's Programme at Nasc provides a much needed holistic service to separated Children or 'Aged out Minors' living in the asylum system in the Cork area and elsewhere. Over the past 2 years, we have utilised a fund provided to us by the One Foundation to provide educational fee payments and to cover other related costs such as travel, books, materials and other related living expenses. We also provide personal and emotional support and act as an advocate on behalf of the Separated Children when the need arises.

We aim to support this vulnerable group of teens and young adults in developing self confidence, new skills and knowledge through access to education and other opportunities in order for them to have a chance at a brighter future.

Who are Separated Children?

Separated children are under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from either parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver.

Sometimes referred to as 'Unaccompanied Minors', we prefer the use of the term Separated Children as this includes a broader range of children - some children who are totally alone as well as others who may be with extended family members but who do not have a primary caregiver.

Separated children are entitled to international protection under a broad range of international instruments and Irish law.

Who Does Nasc Support?

Aged Out Minors

When a separated child arrives in Ireland, and is recognised by the state as a minor, they are placed in the care of the Health Service Executive (HSE). The HSE then situate the child within foster care or specialised residential centre accommodation, while their application for protection is processed.

If Refugee or Subsidiary Protection status is granted while the separated child is still a minor, when they reach 18 years of age they are usually supported by the HSE and enjoy the provision of aftercare. The aftercare service will support the young person throughout the transition to independent living until the age of 24 including access 3rd level education.

However, in cases where a separated child is still awaiting a decision on their asylum application and turns 18, they automatically become known as 'Aged Out Minors' and are no longer considered as part of the HSE care system.

Upon turning 18, 'aged out minors' leave the care of the HSE system and are moved into Direct Provision, accommodation provided by the State for people seeking asylum in Ireland.

'Age Disputed' Separated Children

A situation of 'age dispute' situation arises when an asylum seekers stated age is not accepted as being a minor under 18 years of age. In these cases, the asylum seeker usually undertakes an informal process of age assessment. However, it is often difficult for children to prove how old they are, particularly when they are in their late teens (14 – 17 years of age). Some children do not know their date of birth, are unable to provide documents to support the age they believe themselves to be or even where documents are provided these may not be taken into account.

Being age disputed has significant implications for the way in which a separated child's application for asylum is assessed and for the welfare and educational support that he or she receives. Instead of being taken into the state HSE care system e.g fostering, the child is placed in a Direct Provision Centre and treated as an adult.

From Nasc's experience, this occurs more often than you might think, Nasc has supported 4 male aged disputed minors, one of which who is still a minor at the age of 16 and we have recently helped to access secondary school.

These two vulnerable groups of young people face many challenges on their own, without the care and support of their parents and family or the state care system.

Why Was the Programme Implemented?

The Situation in Ireland for Separated Children

Aged Out Minors must leave the HSE care system and enter the adult Direct Provision system operated by the state's Reception and Integration Agency. Age Disputed Minors will be placed directly into this system.

In some cases, these young people are still in full time secondary school education. They may still be completing their Leaving Certificate or have begun third level courses but must move to adult accommodation elsewhere around the country.

Being dispersed to a new location creates many problems for Aged Out Minors. On a practical level, it is not always possible to get a place in another school or on the courses needed to finish their education. Emotionally too, it is very distressing to leave a foster family and the support network they have built. As separated children they had one or more key care givers allocated to them in addition to an agent of the HSE. As an Aged Out Minor they are moved from a community to a position where specialised support may not exist.

The system of Direct Provision is in stark contrast to the care afforded to the young person under the HSE residential centres or foster placements. Residents in Direct Provision are supplied with only a bed and accommodated in shared rooms (sometimes with a capacity of up to 5 persons). In the majority of direct provision centres, it is a full board service in which meal times are strictly allocated by the centre. Beyond these provisions, adult residents are eligible for just €19.10 per week to cover any other needs.

As such, the lack of privacy and quiet area for homework or further study, restrictive mealtimes and financial constraints are some of the significant areas of concern for aged out minors and age disputed Separated Children within the direct provision system.

How Does Nasc Support Separated Children?

Aged out minors are a vulnerable group of care leavers and often feel isolated. They can become traumatised by the transition to Direct Provision and struggle to adjust to the new living environment which can lead to the development of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Nasc is concerned over the welfare of these young people and aims to advocate on their behalf since they no longer have anyone allocated to do this for them by the state.

Primarily, Nasc supports access to education for this group of young people by providing:

- Financial support in the form of fee payments for educational courses including English Language provision, college courses at FETAC level 3 – 6 and University degrees where possible.
- Payments for the day-to-day needs such as food, study materials, books and transport.
- Personal support. The young people we support also drop into the office once a week which gives them the opportunity to raise with us any concerns that they have.

Nasc's Experience

Outcomes

In 2013, Nasc supported 18 separated children in Cork as well as in the Waterford area through a partnership with the Edmund Rice International Heritage Centre. Of these young people we supported, all but one of them completed the course they had enrolled in or are currently still enrolled in a course and are performing well. At Nasc we are particularly proud of this success rate.

The year 2013 was a particularly successful year for the young people we work with. Nasc staff proudly attended graduations of some students, saw some progress into another academic year and others excitedly start new courses.

Some of the learnings that Nasc have gathered during the initial 2 years running of this project are:

- The importance of providing personal support to the young people – someone to be accountable to, someone to be interested in their grades / encourage educational achievement, to be a good friend.
- Linking in with other support services and educational institutes in the City. For example, Nasc has developed a good relationship with the CIT Access team and with St. Vincent de Paul who have provided additional supports to some particularly vulnerable students.

We also currently have an ongoing pilot internship programme with the Cork Electronics Industry Association (CEIA). Nasc selected two young people that we had previously worked with to join two other young Irish students to take part in this programme which aims to help these young people gain valuable work experience in the field of electronics through a mentoring system.

Challenges

- A high level of personal support is required for the successful operation of this programme – ideally there needs to be a specific person dedicated to the fund in order to keep the young person engaged in education.
- Providing for indirect educational needs e.g. lunch, items of clothing etc.
- Often times, advocacy around related asylum issues must also be provided e.g. particularly isolated direct provision centre locations/ transfers/social payments
- Asylum Seekers are usually required to pay international students fees which are extremely prohibitive – must be prepared to negotiate with local colleges on this. Presenting a medical Card usually removes additional exam costs too.
- Vocational courses / FETAC qualifications are much easier to access than University level, however we have been successful in getting a student access to a degree through the support of the Access team and other NGOs.

- Emerging challenge: upon receiving residency – the transition from the asylum system to independent living is incredibly difficult particularly with regard to retaining educational courses.

Recommendations

- Government policy must be changed to afford Aged out Minors the same system of aftercare as Separated Children granted status and other residents and citizens.
- The HSE must take back responsibility or duty of care of Aged out Minors.
- Taking the best interests of children as the top priority for all government agencies and services (particularly in situations of age disputes).
- The state must allow for access to 3rd level education for asylum seekers (not just ‘school-leaving’ asylum seekers as a recent commitment from Education Minister Jan O’Sullivan stated).
- End of Direct Provision – creating better conditions in which young asylum seekers live will hugely impact these young people’s ability to engage in education.
- The positive potential of an Independent Advocacy style programmes (e.g. the Irish Refugee Council’s programme) and expansion on the CEIA internship programme.