



**Overview of the
Experts By Experience Reference Group
Key Messages**

January 2022 to April 2023

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Introduction:

The Experts by Experience (EBE) Reference Group was created to provide Professor Jones and the Advisory Panel with an insight into children's social care services from those with direct experience of the services being reviewed.

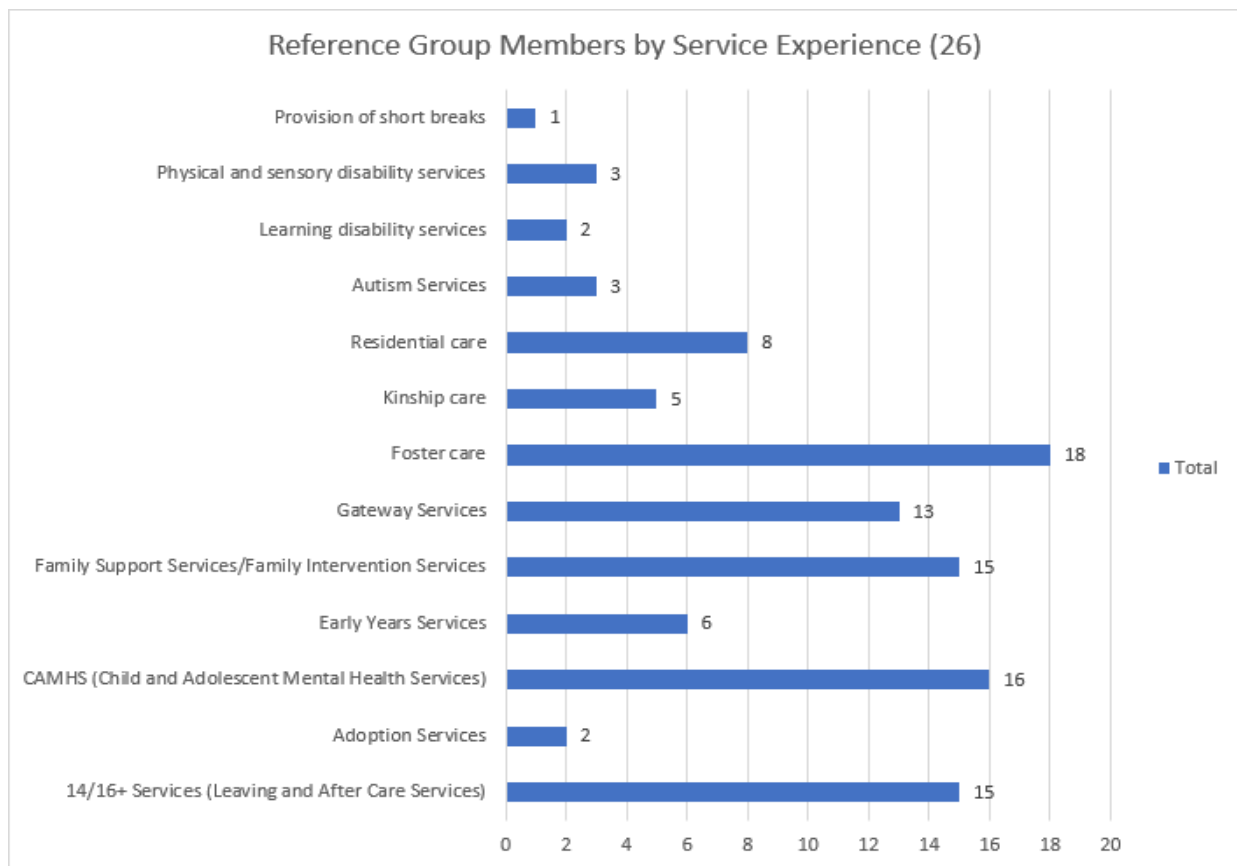
VOYPIC was tasked with recruiting the members of the EBE Reference Group, to ensure that the voice of young people with lived experience was central to the Panel's considerations.

VOYPIC launched recruitment for the Experts by Experience (EBE) Reference Group in January 2022, following the announcement of the Independent Review. Promotional material was distributed widely across the statutory and voluntary children's sector, with expressions of interest invited from young people aged 14-25 years old, with lived experience of at least one of the services being considered by the Review. An online information session was held in February 2022, providing a space for interested young people to find out more about the opportunity and ask any questions about involvement they had.

Applications were received from 31 young people, from across Northern Ireland, representing a wide range of experiences of different children's services. Following a shortlisting exercise, and uptake of references, 23 young people were invited to join the EBE Reference Group. For those young people not selected to be part of the group, VOYPIC hosted a range of workshops, to ensure that all who wanted to contribute to the Review process were supported to have their voice heard.

To ensure the EBE Reference Group had representatives with experiences of all services under Review, additional members were sought to bring their perspective and experiences of physical and sensory disability services. A total of 26 young people participated in the EBE Reference Group over a 12 month period.

Table 1: Reference Group Members by Service Experience

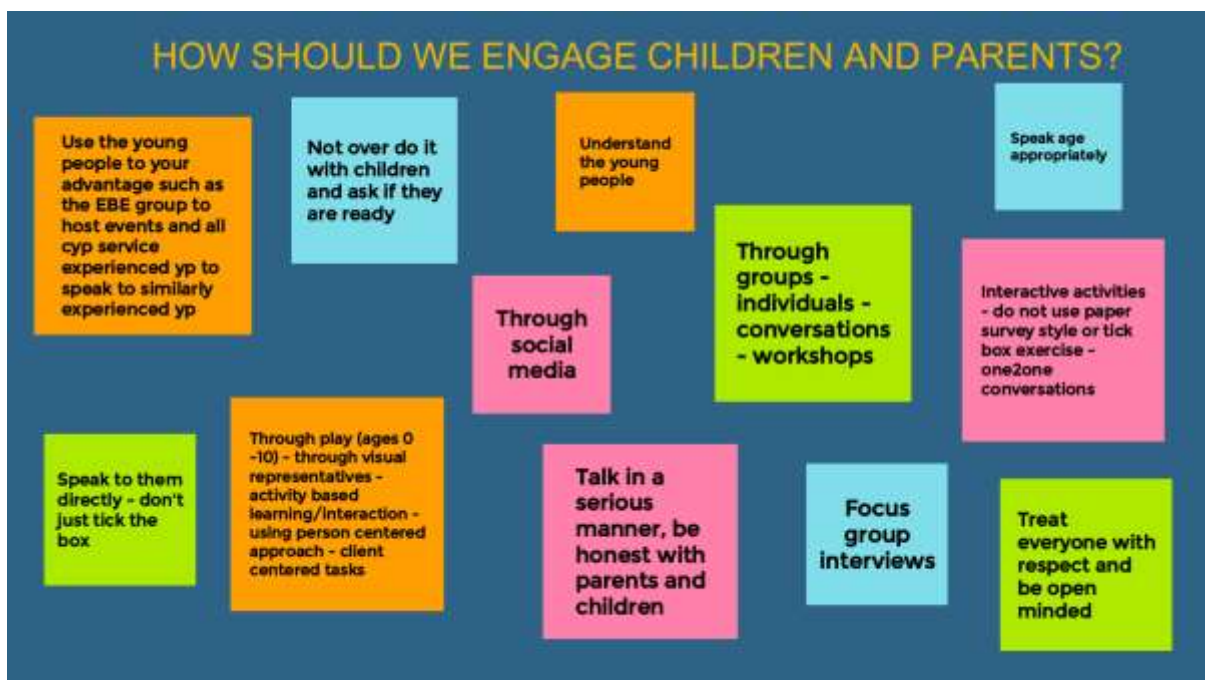


From April 2022 to January 2023, the EBE Reference Group came together in various ways to inform the Review. This started in April with the first teambuilding session in the JUNGLE NI, where work began on building the relationships between the EBE Reference Group members and the VOYPIC staff supporting the Group throughout the process. The Advisory Panel asked the Group to consider who they should engage with and how, to help enable them to design the process. These suggestions helped to shape the ways in which the Review team engaged with children, young people, parents and carers, and professionals throughout the Review process.

Picture 1: Who should the Review team engage with during the Review process? Ideas and suggestions from the Group presented to the Advisory Panel.



Picture 2: How should the Review team engage with children and parents during the Review process? Ideas and suggestions from the Group presented to the Advisory Panel.



The EBE Reference Group came together in various ways throughout the Review:

- Team building sessions
- Online preparation meetings
- EBE Reference Group meetings
- Representing the EBE Group at the Advisory Panel
- Presenting at the Review team's workshops
- Informal meetings with Advisory Panel members

Throughout the process, the members of the Group were supported by VOYPIC, to help them to develop skills and be effective in their role. This included coming together as a group informally to socialise and build positive working relationships. It was important to ensure that the meetings of the group took place in a range of geographical locations across Northern Ireland, to accommodate all members. BSL interpreters attended meetings and team building days to support the members with hearing difficulties, as required. All meetings and activities were arranged to meet the needs of group members and took place in fully accessible venues. Additionally, VOYPIC staff provided check-in support for the young people throughout the process, making sure they felt supported and to ensure they understood what was being expected of them at each stage. The group also had food, drinks and snacks provided at every meeting, and members had all out-of-pocket expenses reimbursed. The members were remunerated for their time and expertise. Those aged under 16 received a voucher to the equivalent value.

In addition to these meetings, the Panel held a range of workshops to gain a broader understanding of children's services in Northern Ireland. This was an important part of the review as it allowed the Panel to directly engage with a wider pool of young people, families and professionals with experience of children's social care services.

The first workshop focused on the key issues impacting care experienced children and young people. A member of the EBE Reference Group delivered a presentation at this workshop in October 2022, sharing information on the work of the Group, as well as the key

themes on this subject to the audience of over 100 practitioners, managers, and policy makers. Six young people involved with VOYPIC also attended.



Picture 3: Rhianna Brown, EBE Reference Group Member presenting to attendees at the Review teams October 2022 workshop on key issues impacting on care experienced children and young people.

Key messages discussed at the workshop, and expanded upon during EBE Reference Group meetings, included:

Where young people in care live:

Stability and feeling secure where they live was important to young people.

Foster Care should be:

- family orientated.
- somewhere to call home.
- somewhere to put down roots.
- somewhere you feel safe and cared for.

- adequately financially supported by the HSCT, however being a foster carer should not be considered to be a job.
- Specialised support for young people with disabilities or additional needs, including appropriate and accessible homes.
- more diverse, to include those with disabilities, single foster carers, same-sex partners etc.

Children's homes should:

- offer a high standard of facilities and care.
- not be seen as a 'last resort' or somewhere children 'end up' when foster care arrangements break down.
- only be for children of post-primary school age and over (11+), with different homes catering for different age brackets.
- not be used for children under 11. Where necessary bespoke placements should be used for younger children.
- be owned and operated by a statutory body, not a private company

Young people agreed there should be more children's homes available, as too many were closed down over the last decade.

Social Worker and Other Staff

- There should be more people involved in the care of the child, with different people having different roles, working as a team.
- The panel should consider what the 'team' supporting young people looks like, what roles the team would include and how the team should be structured.
- The 'team' should provide support 24/7, meaning there is always someone available for the young person no matter what time of day or night.
- The role of a Personal Advisor (PA) should be reviewed, and better defined, thinking about who should be a PA and how PAs are matched to young people.

Participation of Young People

- Young people should be involved in decisions about their care.
- Staff should use age-appropriate resources to engage young children, including through play.
- All children and young people should have access to age-appropriate advocacy support.
- Social Workers should have the skills and tools to engage young children in discussions about their care.
- Foster carers should be upskilled to build their capacity and enable them to be able to talk to children and young people about their care experiences.
- Thought should be given to how we talk about care without alienating children and making them feel 'different'.

Transitions

Too many young people leave care before they are ready, just because they turn 18.

- Consideration should be given to when a young person 'leaves care'.
- The GEM scheme be used more widely and be advertised more.
- The Panel should consider the need for a separate service for 'leaving care'. The young people suggested it may be more appropriate for existing support (social worker/team) to follow the young person beyond their time as a looked after child.

The Panel held a second workshop in November 2022, focused on Family Support. A member of the EBE group with experience of family support services was invited to present. Due to the member's ongoing involvement with family support services, they did not feel comfortable presenting at that time. In order to ensure their voice was heard, two Panel members met with the young person and their peers separately in the VOYPIC office. As this was a more informal and comfortable environment, the young people felt better able to share their experiences.



Picture 4: Professor Ray Jones, Independent Chair and Pat Dolan, Advisory Panel member with members of the EBE Reference Group in "The Lounge" in 100GPS, VOYPIC's Belfast office discussing the young people's experience of family support services.

As well as the Panel's workshops, VOYPIC also held a series of workshops in July and August 2022, attended by Professor Jones and a member of the Advisory Panel, for children and young people with a lived experience of care. VOYPIC also facilitated a workshop with Action for Children and Barnardo's to ensure that young carers experiences were included in the review. A final workshop involving care experienced adults was also arranged by VOYPIC. The key messages agreed by the EBE Reference Group were reaffirmed by the workshops and are detailed throughout this report.

Taking account of the discussions during meetings of the EBE Reference Group, and VOYPIC's summer workshops, the Advisory Panel asked the Group to choose four themes that they thought were most important for the review team to work on going forward. Within these themes the Group was asked to consider what they believed to be working well, what was not working well, and what would help to make it better.

The Group took their original key messages and through discussion they prioritised the four most important themes and what they thought would help to make it better for children and young people in receipt of children's services. The group also thought it was important to highlight the key messages of care experienced young parents who have experience of Family Support Services both as a child and as a parent. The final four themes were;

- Participation of Children and Young People
- Where I Live
- Social Work Workforce
- Transitions

It is worth noting that although all children's services were represented in the EBE reference group, the majority of members had a lived experience of care, as well as experience of other services. This is reflected in their key messages and throughout the response.

Young people were also keen to highlight issues related to young parents.

Participation of Children and Young People

The Group thought it was essential that children and young people who have experience of children's social care services are listened to, and that their voice is not only heard, but that their views are given value and weight in the decisions about their lives.

A young person's social worker and the other people working with them (advocate/personal advisor/key worker/family support worker etc) need to build relationships with young person. This includes social workers making sure to take time to talk to the young person during a home visit, not just with parents or carers. Some children and young people reported that they were not always included in these visits, or did not have the chance to speak with their social worker alone. This could be made better by setting aside some time to check in with the young people about their thoughts and feelings.

Although there are processes in place to assess the needs of children and young people, and to involve them in their care planning, the Group reported that these processes were not always followed. They highlighted the importance of children and young people being included in decisions, especially those made around where the young person lives.

The majority of the Group thought that children and young people should be present for their care planning and review meetings, but all agreed that the choice of whether or not to attend should lie with the young person. Where adults decide it is not appropriate for the young person to attend, it is important to fully explain the reasons for this to them.

The Group felt that it was important that any actions agreed at planning meetings are carried out. Many felt this did not always happen. At their meetings, some of the Group have experienced social workers saying that something will be done, acted on or changed, but once the meeting is over, this does not happen. The Group felt these to be false promises, and that the professionals present at their meeting should explain to them why something was not able to happen or change, rather than to say it would and not act on it.

Every opportunity for appropriate participation should be given to all young people. All children and young people should be entitled to an advocate, and all young people should be told that they are entitled to independent advocacy support from the outset. Young people should be supported to build their confidence, to help them be able to speak up and represent their own views in their meetings.

Young people in care should be given the opportunity to understand their life stories by working with someone in a safe environment. This may include completing a 'life book' or their story in words they understand, and that is appropriate for their age and capacity. This should develop with them throughout their journey in care.

Where I Live

The Group recognised that a decision might have to be made where it is in their best interests for them to no longer remain at home with their family. Young people approached this by considering how this situation should be managed by children's services, both where the decision is planned and, in an emergency, as well as some key messages about their living arrangements generally.

There was a strong argument that all options should be fully considered before the decision is made to remove a child from their family home. While interventions like family group conferencing are available to social workers, the young people felt these were not used fully. Young people also argued that options for kinship care should be properly considered in a planned move, and, where deemed appropriate, the right level of support should be provided to ensure a safe and stable living arrangement for the young person.

It is important that information about the young person is provided to foster carers in advance of any move. Young people suggested that a profile about them be created in partnership with them. This profile could include information such as their school and education, their interests, like and hobbies, their medical and mental health needs, any involvement with police, etc. The profile might also include information about the young person's experience in care, including their previous living arrangements and reasons for the move.

This information would help make the transition period feel less daunting, and help the young person feel more comfortable with their new carers. It would also allow the carers to better prepare to welcome the young person into their home. It is important the profile is updated regularly.

When a child first goes into care, especially when planned, they should be told about any arrangements for them to see their family. It is important the young person knows when

they will get to see them, who will be involved, and where these family time visits will take place. The Group felt this should be reviewed at least every three months in the first year, and more frequently if requested by the young person.

The Group believe more bespoke options are needed where a young person must go into care in an emergency scenario. These must be better able to provide support for a child's mental health needs, particularly that related to trauma, for children and young people with physical and sensory disabilities generally, and specifically for young people in a mental health crisis.

Being able to retain a sense of control in such circumstances was important for the young people. They felt young people should be able to pack their own bag, and to bring with them items that are important to them, when leaving the family home. This might include familiar home comforts, favourite clothes or toys, and keepsakes. While an adult should be there to help and support the young person to pack, the decision on what items to take should be for the young person wherever possible.

All young people felt that staff's management of difficult situations could be improved. They talked about the fear a group of adults coming to their home created, and in some cases their sense of anxiety by being kept in their room with one adult during their removal. They highlighted the need to keep the young people reassured, while also explaining to them what was happening, in a safe, supported and child-friendly way.

After they have been removed from their home, the young person may be taken to a social work office to wait until an emergency foster family can be identified. This should only happen where necessary, and for the shortest time possible. Where it does need to happen, the Group felt it important that the office should have a safe, comfortable, and entertaining room for children and young people to wait in. Equally, they should not be left alone in the room, and should be reassured and informed of what is happening. They should also be offered food and drink as appropriate.

Throughout a child's journey in care, whether a move is planned or unplanned, a note should be taken of any specific triggers that cause trauma for the child. This should be kept within their social work file, and understood by their social worker.

Young people also reiterated the importance of transport being available to allow them to remain in their school. All agreed that this arrangement needs to be guaranteed, as it may be the only settled and consistent part of their life. In instances where this is not possible, young people should be informed and involved in decisions about their school, with assurances that it will be reviewed as appropriate.

A safe and stable living arrangement is a positive factor in every child's life. However, the Group feared some young people in care with such stability are forgotten about. One young person in the Group shared they felt forgotten, because their stable arrangement meant they did not have regular visits from their social worker, and did not have a proper care planning and review meeting in several years.

The young people also highlighted training available for foster carers, but questioned the uptake of such opportunities. They felt this training should be mandatory, with additional support on issues such as dealing with trauma and special educational needs and disabilities offered.

Overall, through discussion and sharing with peers from across Northern Ireland, the young people felt there is great variation of processes and adherence to policy across the five HSCT areas in relation to coming into care.

Children's homes were another area the young people explored and made some suggestions to improve the experience of their peers. They felt that children's homes should be re-designed and re-structured to make them better able to meet the young people's needs.

The group agreed that this should involve ensuring that appropriate age groups and circumstances are considered before admission to children's homes. Young people believed that living in a children's home can come as a huge culture shock, and feel that some young people may be exposed to behaviours that they would not have experienced if they lived with a foster carer, or if the homes were structured in a different way. The young people are aware that staff in children's homes currently receive training to enable them to deal with trauma and issues that may arise, however they highlighted the need for more support and guidance for staff at children's homes to ensure the physical and emotional safety of the children living there.

Social Work Workforce

Children and young people value the role of the social worker, however experiences amongst the Group varied. Young people easily identified how their relationship with and support from their social worker could be improved. Lack of available support at essential times was a key issue for young people.

Young people felt that the role of a social worker is to support the young person, and care for their safety and wellbeing. They believe social workers need to be empathetic and understanding towards them, seeing them as a person, and not a case on their workload.

Throughout the period of the Review's work, young people consistently raised working hours as an area of concern, particularly the lack of support outside normal office hours. Their life and the issues they may face do not fit neatly into a scheduled timetable.

Young people feel that in order to have 24/7 support, it is important that they have support from more than one named social worker. Young people came up with some suggestions as to how this could look in practice:

- Support person for after current hours (after 5pm)
- Social worker to have phone on standby
- Separate social worker starts work at 5pm to do alternative shifts
- Have 2 social workers, one from 9am-5pm and then from 5pm+
- Set up a 24h support line (like Lifeline) for children and young people who need help

Like everyone, social workers may experience periods of sickness, requiring them to take time off work. Additionally, social workers rightly have annual leave entitlement, as well as parental leave entitlement, and the right to other forms of leave. And, social workers have the right to move on to other employment.

Young people feel it is important that they are made aware when their social worker is unavailable, and given options for alternative supports during this time. Young people suggested having a team on call that can provide support when their social worker is off.

Young people discussed approaches to social worker recruitment and training, concentrating on what makes a good social worker.

Proper initial training, as well as career-long learning and development, was seen as essential. Young people agreed that social workers should have a sound knowledge of legislation, policy and procedure, and be equipped with the tools and skills to best support the young people.

However, the young people argued that personal aptitude, natural emotional intelligence, and qualities such as empathy and compassion, were essential for social workers. Most felt these could not be 'learned', and therefore should be assessed before entry to social work training.

One of the Group said *"Don't hire **** (bad) social workers"*. To achieve this, they suggested having care experienced young people on interview panels for social workers and other professionals working with care experienced young people.

Transitions

Members of the Group discussed their experience of preparation for transitions between services, and transitions out of children's services.

The Group found it frustrating that approaches to transitions varied so much across the five HSCTs, meaning proven good practice, schemes and projects were not available to all young people across the region. For example, one member of the Group shared positive experiences of the STAY (Supported Temporary Accommodation for Youth) supported lodgings scheme, however this was only available for young people in the Southern HSCT at the time of the discussion. The scheme offers vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds short-term accommodation and support until they can find permanent accommodation.

The young people felt that this scheme should be available to all young people across Northern Ireland. They were clear that schemes like this, that support young people into early adulthood, should not be dependent on the young person being in employment or education.

Young people feel that the process of transitioning out of children's social care services should start with earlier preparations, and that this should be standardised across all HSCTs. Currently, across the five Trust areas, there are three different ages at which a young person

is considered to be *'leaving care'*: 14, 16, and 18. This is not only confusing, but can lead to additional difficulties where a young person moves from one HSCT area to another after leaving care.

Children and young people highlighted the need for work to begin at an earlier stage on their pathway planning, to better ensure a stable transition from children's services, and to enable them to thrive into adulthood. They made various suggestions as to how this transition could be smoother:

- One to one work carried out with all young people to inform them of the services/support available, discussing all options for leaving and after care, including housing, rights and entitlements, and support that available to them post-18.
- Monthly check-in meetings with the young person for a year after they turn 18 and leave care.
- Work should be done in care and pathway planning around identifying significant adults in a young person's life that can support them once services stop.
- Additional support for young people leaving children's homes, including a phased approach into supported living.
- A grace period, where a young person can come back to the home and ask for practical and emotional support. Young people noted that their peers often return to the family home for help from their parents, so the same should be available from the HSCT as their 'corporate parent'.
- Improved adoption support services, which could help prevent relationship and adoption breakdown. One member suggested that a young person should have an option at 16 to choose whether to stay adopted or not.

Where a young person is transitioning from inpatient CAHMS, external practitioners and family need to have clear, consistent information about how to provide emotional and practical support post discharge. When good practice in the inpatient setting has created consistency, safety and understanding this needs to be explained to external care givers and they need to be given the skills and or resources to create similar support and ease the young person into community life again, this is also the case for young people transitioning from secure care.

Young Parents with Care Experience

From the EBE Reference Group discussions and the VOYPIC workshops, an area of concern identified was the experience of young parents, specifically young mothers who have a care experience, or who have previously been known to social services.

Group members and workshop participants felt that care experienced young parents were under greater scrutiny, and do not feel supported by social services. Rather they feel judged and singled out based on their previous experience. Young parents do not feel comfortable to ask for support, fearing they will be viewed as not able to cope and potentially have their child taken from them.

In situations where a young parent has asked for support for their child and have been included in meetings, their past traumas are often discussed with everyone present. It is important to consider their confidentiality in these meetings. Having past trauma and negative experiences brought up in this way can prove extremely triggering, and can make the situation worse.

Where their past experience is relevant to the process, the young parent should be made aware of what will be shared, and supported to engage in the discussions. This would lead to better outcomes for both the child and the care experienced young parent.

Young parents with recent experience of care are more aware than most of the need for, and potential benefits of, external agency support. Therefore, it is important that processes and assessments do not leave them feeling judged, but more empowered to seek additional support when necessary.

Some members of the EBE Reference Group, and participants in the relevant workshop, felt that they were treated as children during their involvement with family support services. Therefore, it is important to remember that the care experienced parents are young adults and should be treated as such.

Involvement of a young parent's new partner was also identified as an area of concern by the group. Some noted that new partners, particularly male partners of the child's mother, often have to undertake assessments when they become involved in the child's life. The group perceived a sense of unequal treatment, with female partners of the child's father not

having to undergo such rigorous assessment. The group agreed that providing support for new families was important for the welfare and wellbeing of both the child and the parents.

Advice to the Review Panel

Throughout the process, the young people involved in the Experts by Experience Reference Group have provided their opinions and ideas for improvements in children's social care services. All ideas and feedback outlined in this report have been shared with the Panel.

The young people have also shared their concerns about the future of this process, beyond the publication of the report, especially:

- How the recommendations of the Review can be delivered in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive
- Whether there is a will to deliver on the Panel's recommendations, citing previous experiences of involvement in consultations that did not bring about change

In order to counter this, the EBE Reference Group suggested the Panel should also produce a draft action plan for the delivery of the recommendations.

Throughout the discussion, the young people were keen to promote a message of involvement, clear that it is important to *"talk to us, not about or for us"*.

The Group members thanked the Review Panel for adopting this approach, talking to them and listening to them. They remain hopeful that the recommendations will reflect their key messages.

"My hopes for the review would be that all children and young people, regardless of where they live receive the same services and care right across the region, that's something we noticed is very much lacking."

EBE Reference Group Member