



“Now What?: Preparing and Empower- ing Youth Leaving Care”

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Output 6: The Set of European Standards



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1. Introduction

1.1. Now what? Project

The present document, the “European Set of Standards” has been developed as part of the project titled “Now What?: Preparing and Empowering Youth Leaving Care”, funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The Now What? project aims at the adequate and effective preparation of young people leaving care to lead an independent life through educational and supporting activities. The project is implemented in the following four European countries: Portugal, Romania, Albania and Greece.

More specifically, the project has developed and implemented different activities in order to achieve its goals and fully prepare children and youth to leave the care system of their country and enter independent adult life. Such activities included a research phase, when their educational needs are expressed, an educational element, when youth were trained in specific life skills, and empowerment activities, the most important of which was the development of a mentoring relationship between each participating care leaver and an adult.

Regarding the set of activities related to the educational support provided to care leavers, project partners have designed, developed and implemented a series of educational interventions aimed at care leavers, titled “The Life Skills Workshops”. During the workshops, care leavers are trained in those life skills, which, according to international findings and the Now What report on their Needs’ Analysis (Output 1), are necessary for their smooth transition from care to independence. Certain thematic fields are included in the training, such as education, accommodation, citizenship, employment and health so as to acquire and develop the corresponding skills.

Regarding the empowerment activities, aimed at the individualized support of the care leavers participating in the project’s approach, project partners have designed and implemented the mentoring process. Each care leaver was assigned an older and more experienced adult, the mentor, and through a set of meetings they discussed on issues related to the first steps each care leaver will take once they have left the care institution. These steps were included in the “After Care Plan” each care leaver designed and developed with the support and direction of his/ her mentor. The plan included areas, such as accommodation, education and training, free time activities, financial issues and time management issues, so that care leavers are adequately prepared to face different situations related to their pathway towards independence, after they have left the care system.

The project’s framework consisted of the following activities:

1. Creating a network of active and relevant European actors in the field of child protection and care leaving initiatives.
2. Conducting an analytic primary research needs’ analysis and a desk-top study of the existing material
3. Developing a Curriculum addressing the care leavers’ needs as identified through the research
4. Adapting and contextualizing the Curriculum to the specificities and the requirements of each national context
5. Creating the training and teaching materials, as well as the mentoring protocols and relevant processes.
6. Offering introduction and basic training to trainers and mentors.

7. Delivering the pilot learning and mentoring courses at local level
8. Re-evaluating the curricula and make necessary adjustments
9. Dissemination and sharing the final outputs

1.2. About the Set of European Standards

The present document, the European Set of Standards, includes the experiences and the conclusions from the implementation of the Life Skills Workshops and the After Care Plans in the four participating countries. It involves the combination of all findings that emerged throughout the project regarding the provision of the Now What approach to care leavers regarding the acquisition and development of specific knowledge, skills and attitudes relating to the process of preparing for an independent adult life.

The ultimate aim of the European Set of Standards is to provide the methodology and the process to enable the use of the project results by any other potential European stakeholders.

These standards were created throughout the Now What? project, by professionals working in the field of child protection and care leavers assistance involved either in direct care, education or research initiatives:

- West University Timisoara, Romania
- SOS Children's Villages Romania,
- DGASPC Timis (Child Protection), Romania
- University of Tirana, Albania
- SOS Children's Villages from Albania,
- Lusófona University from Portugal,
- The Smile of the Child from Greece
- Athens Lifelong Learning Institute from Greece

The European Set of Standards are designated to be of use first of all to European practitioners who work with children and young people in care or/and transitioning out of care as well as local, national and international political decision-makers, but also for the academic world with directions for future research. Nevertheless, future financing proposals could use our European Standards in creating models of supporting care leavers.

At a glance, in the beginning the European Set of Standards provide an overview of the notions on existing alternative care in Europe as well as the international Guidelines on alternative care. Then, the Now What approach and its different components is presented, followed by the description and the evaluation of the project implementation in each national setting. Recommendations by project partners on the future replication of the approach are provided in a different chapter, while the final part of the Standards is dedicated to specific policy recommendations on the effective ways to support children and youth in care when they are in the process of transitioning from a care institution to independent adult life.

2. Background

2.1. Life and Survival After Care

Over one million children live in institutions in Europe. For a number of reasons, these children are unable to grow up with their biological families, thus, after official intervention, they are placed into out-of-home care. These children, deprived of families and parental care, constitute Europe's most vulnerable people.

Most of these children in the EU Member States child welfare systems will simply „age out“ of the system when they turn 18, without a family and without the skills to make it on their own. Some care leavers cope well, but most find the path to independence precarious.

After the age of 18 there are few provisions for young care leavers: no additional services to support them, no financial aid, nor employment and accommodation. The process of preparation to leave care and the subsequent transition into adulthood is chronically flawed. Young care leavers face insurmountable problems and no specific action has been undertaken to improve this situation. Without anybody to guide them, listen to them or support them financially, many young care leavers struggle in life.

Research findings unveils the prominence of a number of recurring themes in this process, such as the fact that relative to their peer, young people leaving care tend to:

- have lower level of educational attainment
- have higher unemployment rates
- live in unstable and poor quality housing or experience homelessness
- become parents at a very young age
- have mental health problems
- have relatively high levels of substance abuse
- be over-represented in prison
- experience emotional hardship.

While many young adults continue to receive support from their families well into their twenties, youth who age out of alternative care often grow up without the family and community networks to help them successfully transition into adulthood. For these individuals, ageing out mean losing desperately needed care, including financial assistance for basic needs as well as educational, social and emotional support.

In comparison to their peers, young care leavers have to cope with the challenges and responsibilities of major changes in their lives, in leaving care and setting-up a home of their own, in leaving school and entering the world of work, or of being parents, at a far younger age.

In short, many have compressed and accelerated transitions to adulthood. These young people are denied the psychological opportunity and space to focus and to deal with issues over time which is how most of their peers cope with the challenges of transition. For these young people the guidance of a social worker can make all the difference.

The difference between those who successfully „move on”, those who „survive” and those who „struggle” greatly depends on the support they receive prior leaving care and during the transition.

2.2. The Situation of Care Leavers – Alternative Care in Europe and Beyond

2.2.1. Population of children in care

At present, there are millions of children living in institutions worldwide; while, every year 150.000 youths leave their “homes” as they age out of alternative care¹. The process has received very little attention, with the result that this youth is often forgotten once they have left care. Young people leaving care are expected to become independent at a very early age, considerably younger than peers who grow up in their families.

These young people face challenges without the usual safety nets on which to fall back, raising the risk of social exclusion. Most European governments lack specific policies and plans of action to address this problem. The consequences of the little importance given to this key transitional period in a young person’s life, throughout Europe, are disastrous.

Research findings report how the non-preparedness for the after-care life leads to indigence, homelessness, offending, substance abuse, renewed placement in an [adult] residential facility and even suicide. These findings reflect the situation in many European countries, including Romania, Albania, Portugal and Greece, which is the focus of the present report.

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) affords every child the right to “a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development” and requires that parents or those responsible for the child “secure, within their abilities and financial capabilities, the conditions of living necessary for the child’s development” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Additionally, Article 18 of the CRC states that “Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

However, there are many conditions under which parents might find themselves unable to fulfil these obligations, rendering their children without proper parental care and protection. In such situations parents may decide that they are either unable or unwilling to provide necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, health care, protection and/or education, or the State may intervene to remove their children.

Such situations can result from a number of wide-ranging factors including poverty, health issues, household or community violence, stigma, emergencies, or substance abuse. Although most European States officially exclude poverty and material deprivation as reasons for the placement of a child in a care institution, these are often underlying causes for family separation.

The current gaps in evidence and research are likely to be obscuring how poverty and social exclusion concretely feature in the decisions leading to the entry of children into the system of alternative care.

1 Eurochild (2020): Report on the transition from institutional care to community- based services in 27 Member States.

Generally, the separation of children from their family environment is normally not related to a single issue but to a combination of factors such as material poverty, inadequate housing, single parenthood, lack of gynecological coverage and family planning (resulting in unwanted/unmonitored pregnancies), lack of parenting skills, lack of access to welfare, lack of support from the extended family, unemployment, lack of access to day-care and specialized services for children with disabilities, health conditions of children or parents, substances misuse, stigma and discrimination. If these factors are not properly addressed, the situation in the family can escalate and lead to neglect, abuse and violence (Eurochild, 2012a: 12-13). This loss of parental care and protection may result in children having to live in alternative care institutions. Article 20 of the CRC stipulates that States Parties are responsible for ensuring such care in situations where children are “temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

While the majority of the available research literature has focused on documenting the conditions of children living in alternative care (particularly institutional care) and its potential effects on child development and functioning, there have been only a few attempts to quantify the number of children living in different alternative care arrangements.

Furthermore, available estimates have often been published with limited information on the methods used to obtain these, leaving room for doubts about their reliability and actual coverage². An often-quoted figure dating back to the 1980s suggested that between six and eight million children lived in alternative care institutions worldwide; however, the latest global estimate, published in 2009, put the number of children in institutional care at more than two million, with Central and Eastern Europe having the highest reported figure at around 800,000 children in institutional care (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2009).

More recently, the Transformative Monitoring for Enhanced Equity (TransMonEE) project estimated that more than 1.4 million children were in formal care (i.e., either residential or family-type care such as foster care or guardianship) in 2012 in 22 countries and the European Union (TransMonEE, 2014). In Latin America and the Caribbean, an estimate published in 2013 based on data from 27 countries in the region put the number of children in residential care at around 240,000 (Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia, 2013).

More particularly, regarding the situation of children in care in Europe, in the survey carried out by Eurochild on information on children in alternative care - including residential, community- and family-based care (Eurochild, 2010) it was estimated that 1 million children grow up in public care across the EU, representing approximately 1% of the child population. Moreover, according to data from the UNICEF report “At Home or in a Home?” (2010) approximately 1.3 million children lived in various types of public care arrangements in the Europe in 2007, out of which 600.000 in residential care.

The proportion of children in alternative care systems varies between countries. In Latvia, for example, around 2.2% of children are taken into public care. In Sweden approximately 0.66% of the child population is affected. In Romania, approximately 1.6% of the child population is under special protection – more or less unchanged since 1997 (1.66% of children)³.

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213416302873>

³ https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05_Library/Thematic_priorities/06_Children_in_Alternative_Care/Eurochild/FINAL_EXEC_SUMMARY.pdf

2.2.2. Characteristics of alternative care in Europe

Despite certain difficulties in describing alternative care for children in Europe as a unique institution, there are some characteristics which can provide a clear picture on the provision of this type of care, as presented in the survey titled “Foster Care Models in Europe”, by Maja Laklija in 2011. The author makes the following remarks:

“The basic characteristics of public care for children in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are:

1. increased need for care for children outside their families,
2. high proportion of children in children’s institutions, and
3. weak traditions of alternative forms of childcare such as foster care and family-like homes (Ajduković, 2004, according to Laklija, 2011).

Following the fall of communism in the 1990s, there is a slow change in the former socialist countries related to the political and ideological heritage and policies on institutionalized care, which is now gradually being deinstitutionalized. Decision-makers in those countries follow the experience of developed countries and work towards increasing the number of foster families. In the process, they are supported by the World Bank, European Union, UNICEF, Caritas, Save the Children, Open Society Institute, Sida and other organizations. In addition to Hungary and Poland, Romania is a good example of successful changes in that area (Laklija, 2011).

The main characteristics of care for children in the countries of West Europe are:

1. a relatively small proportion of children placed in institutions,
2. a well-developed foster care system, and
3. a wide range of other alternative forms of care (Ajduković, 2004, according to Laklija, 2011).

However, there are differences even among them, depending on their socio-economic policies. For instance, the countries with liberal democracy (United Kingdom) have financial possibilities, but lack the government policies supporting foster parents (Curtis, Dale and Kendall, 1999, George, Oudenhoven and Wazir, 2003, according to Laklija, 2011.).

Accordingly, the practice shows that the most developed countries of the West have conceded foster care to informal mechanisms in the society and that the government’s role is in comparison negligible. There are also notable regional differences in the rights of foster parents, resulting in lowering the competence for foster care to the local level (Ajduković, 2005, according to Laklija, 2011).

On the contrary, in the socio-democratic systems with a strong social policy, i.e. in the so-called Nordic countries, the government plays an important role in the promotion and professionalization of foster care. However, they are also being increasingly confronted with the same political and economic constraints as the liberal-democratic countries (George, Oudenhoven and Wazir, 2003, according to Laklija, 2011.)”

Moreover, apart from similarities in alternative care systems across different parts of Europe, some further characteristics can be added to describe them, as follows:

Wide use of care

According to different surveys, alternative and institutional care is still widely used for children without adequate parental care in Europe. Although most countries recognize placement in an institution as the solution of last resort after family support services and family-based care, the number of children in institutions is stable or rising in several EU countries.

In the Czech Republic, for example, only around 25% of children are in foster-care settings and the number of children in institutions has increased since 2000 (Unicef Transmonee). Latvia and Lithuania have also seen an increase in the number of children in institutions. Since new legislation was introduced in Romania, the number of foster care placements has increased by 35%, compared to January 2005 (15.920 children). Nonetheless an estimated 17.937 children are still in foster care and 15.993 in residential care (September, 2019).

2.2.3. Vulnerable groups in care

Another issue pointed out in several studies is the fact that certain vulnerable groups of children are over-represented in the care systems of Europe. An example of this is Roma children and children with disabilities. In Bulgaria, for example, Roma children account for approximately 45% of children in care. In the Czech Republic in 2007 24% of children in care homes were Roma. In Hungary, children of Roma origin are over-represented in institutions, compared to their representation in the population as a whole (officially it is not allowed to collect data based on ethnic origin on the basis of right to privacy). The institutionalization of children with disabilities is a major concern in many countries of the EU.

In Latvia, the Eurochild survey reports that municipalities do not have the resources to give additional support to children with minor physical or behavioral disorders. Placing children in institutions avoids this cost – they are not under municipality authority. Finally, the recent migration flows have added another vulnerable group to be highly represented in alternative care: the group of unaccompanied children, especially in those countries which receive the largest numbers of migrants, such as Greece and Italy.

2.2.4. Rights of children in care

Although most European countries have standards to protect the rights of the children in alternative care, in many cases their implementation is weak. There are still several countries, (e.g. Greece, Latvia and the Czech Republic) where standards are not yet fully implemented. Concerning monitoring of the standards, in many countries we find that there is a lack of data, while in some others, like Estonia, Finland, Sweden, regular reports are published. In other countries such as the UK, the time and cost involved in regulation, monitoring and inspection are seen as being disproportionate to the actual benefits in terms of improved services.

Involvement of children and parents in the decision-making process still remains very weak in many of the European countries. In the case of Ireland, regulations, standards and legislation are significant in comparison to other countries; the reality of proper consultation with children and their families is

a separate issue. The Irish Social Services Inspectorate found that “care planning was still more often determined by crisis management rather than long term planning” where the voice and opinion of the child and family may not be considered. In the UK, although progress has been made with regard to involving children in alternative care in planning their own care, there is still much scope for improvement.

2.3. The Principles of UN on Alternative Care

Since its adoption in 1989, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been the main international treaty and legislative framework with regard to promotion and protection of the rights of the child. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which provides the interpretation of the principles and articles of the Convention, has on numerous occasions emphasized the need to invest effectively in family-support services so that institutional care of children is only employed as a last resort.

2.3.1. General principles of rights of the child

Respect for the dignity, life, survival, well-being, health, development, participation and nondiscrimination of the child as a rights-bearing person should be established and championed as the pre-eminent goal of States Parties’ policies concerning children. This is best achieved by respecting, protecting and fulfilling all the rights in the CRC and its Optional Protocols. It requires a shift away from child-protection approaches in which children are perceived and treated as “objects” in need of assistance or as “victims” rather than as rights holders entitled to nonnegotiable rights to protection.

A child-rights approach is one which furthers the realization of the rights of all children as set out in the Convention by developing the capacity of duty bearers to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfill rights (Art. 4) and the capacity of rights holders to claim their rights, guided at all times by the rights to non-discrimination (Art. 2), consideration of the best interests of the child (Art. 3, para.1), life, survival and development (Art. 6), and respect for the views of the child (Art. 12).

Children also have the right to be directed and guided in the exercise of their rights by care givers, parents and community members, in line with children’s evolving capacities (Art. 5). This child-rights approach is holistic and places emphasis on supporting the strengths and resources of the child him/herself and all social systems of which the child is a part. Family and community are most important among these systems.

There are convincing messages in the CRC clearly guiding governments to develop child-protection services in such a way that as many children as possible are able live in families, and not in institutions (https://europe.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Children_under_3.pdf).

On the issue of alternative childcare, a Handbook on European law relating to the rights of the child has been produced jointly by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the Council of Europe, in cooperation with the Registry of the European Court of Human Rights, in 2015.

The Handbook, among other texts on Children’s Rights, includes the following excerpts on the general principles for alternative care, on placing children in alternative care and on adoption:

2.3.2. Alternative care: Basic Principles

The broad principles relating to alternative care are:

- Alternative care is a protective measure that ensures children's interim safety and facilitates children's return to their families where possible. Ideally, it is thus a temporary solution.
- International law confirms that family based care (such as foster care) is the optimal form of alternative care for securing children's protection and development.
- The child's right to a guardian or representative is key to securing his or her broader rights.
- There is the legal obligation to take positive measures to ensure that decision-making about a child's placement is guided by his/her best interests and views.
- Cultural identity of the child should be maintained to ensure cultural needs are supported and addressed in a reassuring and value building manner.

Children's broader rights remain applicable to cases of alternative care (foster or residential care). This includes their civil and political rights (e.g. their rights to privacy, freedom of expression and freedom of religion and protection from all forms of violence) and their socio economic rights (including their rights to education, healthcare and participation in cultural life).

2.3.3. Placing children in alternative care

Some key points on the placement of children in alternative care are as follows:

- Under the Council of Europe law, placing a child in alternative care should be provided for by law, pursue a legitimate aim and be necessary in a democratic society. Relevant and sufficient reasons must be put forward by the competent authority.
- Under Council of Europe law, the decision-making process must follow certain procedural safeguards.
- Even when placed in alternative care, children retain the right to maintain contact with their parents.
- Given that placement in alternative care should normally be a temporary measure, maintaining family relationships is essential to ensure the successful return of the child to his/her family.

2.3.4. Adoption

Some key points on adoption are as follows:

- Adoption ensures alternative care for children who cannot remain with their biological families.
- The best interests of the child must be the paramount consideration in adoption.
- There is no right to adopt under EU or Council of Europe law, but the adoption process must adhere to certain criteria to ensure that it is in the best interests of the child.

Under international law, the best interests of the child must be the paramount consideration in cases of adoption. Aside from the best interests' principle, other general principles of the CRC also guide and inform its implementation in the context of adoption: non discrimination, the right to life, survival and development and respect for children's views. Of particular relevance is the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 14 on the "right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration".

3. The Now What Approach

This section of the European Set of Standards includes the approach undertaken by project partners in order to develop and implement all project activities and outputs. The section includes the steps taken as well as the conclusions drawn and it targets all relevant stakeholder who would like to replicate the project's approach in their specific national or institutional setting.

In this section the major project activities are presented, namely:

1. The care leavers' needs analysis
2. The development of educational materials
3. The Life Skills Workshops
4. The Mentoring Component and
5. The After Care Plans.

3.1. Needs analysis

The main purpose of this analysis of needs was to know, analyze and understand the needs of the young people who will leave the care institutions as well as the difficulties and problems they will encounter in the transition process towards independent life. The analysis also aimed to analyze and describe youth services and support agents and services which support them in meeting their needs and to identify, describe and analyze gaps in the provision of services and the areas in which those needs remain not met. At first, a thorough bibliographical research was conducted in the four participating countries on the state-of-the-art of the existing care leaving support structures and the service provisions to care leavers, related to their educational services and guidance services. Within the context of the research similar support services were sought and described at national, European and international level.

Secondly, for the identification and analysis of the needs of the young people who are leaving care and going to an autonomous life, a questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose was administered to the following groups:

- young people who have already left the host care institutions and
- young people who still are in a host care institution.

The questionnaire was structured on issues related to the needs and problems in the process of transition from the care institutions to an autonomous life. In addition to the description of the profile of the young people who are leaving care, the questionnaire questions aimed to collect the attitudes, opinions, perceptions, interests and behaviors of the young people of the two samples with regard to the process of transition to an autonomous life.

In addition to the questionnaire, the research on the care leavers educational and support needs included two more methods:

- in- depth interviews with care professionals, care leavers, NGOs operating in the field and relevant stakeholders. The purpose of the interviews was to reveal those specific issues which facilitate or hinder the transition of care leavers from the care institution to independence. Then such interviews were conducted in each national setting.
- focus group discussions with care professional, care leavers and relevant stakeholders. The discussions focused on the experiences of each group regarding the process of leaving care and fruitful insight was gained on the efficient and effective support care leavers should have when transitioning to adulthood. Deficiencies in support services were also identified as well as the existing good practices in the area.

The results from the “Now What?” project survey have verified international findings on the issue. Some of the findings of the survey in the four participating countries are as follows:

- 95% of the care leavers need help to find a job that meets their needs and 92% need to carry out the necessary actions.
- 97% of the care leavers are studying and want to continue their studies, while only 3% is not studying and does not want to go back to school.
- 54% of the care leavers sometimes prefer to spend their free time reading, watching movies and theatre, while 43% often prefers to spend their free time playing video games.
- 96% of the care leavers would like to take their driving license, 75% follows the news and 11% have voted in the past.
- 76% of the care leavers have confirmed that their money come from their parents’ monthly or weekly allowance. 10% of the care leavers gain some money from their family, while another 10% acquire their money from a job salary, and 3% do not know where their money comes from.
- 11% of the care leavers spend more money than they have available. 22% have accumulated debts with their mobile phone. 26% have accumulated debts with credit card, while 4% have accumulated debts to people they know. 70% have not accumulated debt due to the financial assistance to their studies. 48% do not have enough money to pay their monthly bills. 52% would like to be helped while making a budget, and 11% of the participants have a bank account.

In general, the in- depth interviews and focus groups conclusions were as following:

- Support measures are needed on the dimensions of personal development, the development of skills for accessing community resources, clarification of personal and professional objectives, management of financial resources, materials.
- Take into consideration that there is some reluctance of young people in relation to other members of the community, it would be desirable to have a non-discriminatory position from the public opinion, knowing that there is, at the population level, an attitude marked by some prejudices in what about post-institutionalized young people are.
- The importance of developing programs designed to direct the personal interests of the young people towards aspects that constitute personal growth factors for them - competitions, sports activities, reading circles, computer science, drawing, music, etc. was highlighted
- The personalized programs of psychological assistance, the mentoring activities, the involvement in extracurricular activities and the promotion of the motivational interventions can represent measures of management of the risks that face the post institutionalized young people.

Overall, the needs analysis at national and European levels verified the main areas where further support is needed, so that care leavers are fully prepared to face all aspects of an independent adult life.

These areas related to specific life skills which care leavers needed to acquire and develop as well as to a more structured and personalized plan which care leavers need to create in order to navigate in adult life effectively. The needs analysis provided the partnership with the information on the following project activities.

3.2. Educational materials

The aim of this activity was the creation of a Life Skills Training Curriculum which help prospective care leavers build meaningful relationships and develop skills which will strengthen their ability to function well in society. The Life Skills Curriculum was supplemented by relevant educational materials for the facilitation of the learning process which was applied during the next stage of the project.

List of products develop during the implementation of this output

[1]. the After Care Life Skills Curriculum. The Curriculum consisted of the following thematic areas:

- The Legal Stuff: Entitlements and Obligations,
- Money Management,
- Maintaining a Home,
- Looking after One's Well-Being,
- Employment,
- Education,
- Having a Good Lifestyle,
- Navigating Local Services, and
- Communication and Interpersonal Relationships.

Each area was then divided in separate educational components, three to four for each one. The following step was the creation of extended Lesson Plans, so as to facilitate the work of the trainers undertaking the Life Skills Workshops and to contribute to the development of the Handbook and the Toolkit for students. The Curriculum was produced in English and then adapted in the partners' languages and national specificities.

[2]. the Life Skills Handbook: The Handbook was the ultimate educational aid to be provided to students of the Life Skills Workshops, i.e. the care leavers. The Handbook followed the contents of the Curriculum and relevant Lesson Plans and it was divided in different chapters. The structure of each chapter was as follows:

- The first part of the chapter contained information on each different thematic field
- The second part of each chapter contained country specific information on the services provided to care leavers on the relevant areas, so that they can refer to when they live on their own.

The Handbook was produced in English and then adapted to each national setting.

[3]. the Life Skills Toolkit: The Toolkit included several cleverly designed resources to be used by the care leavers once they have left the care institutions. It was divided in different chapters, following the structure of the Curriculum and the Handbook. It was produced in English and then adapted to the four countries' specificities.

[4]. Videos: A series of videos were produced as a key learning tool for the Life Skills Workshops. The videos contained stories of former care leavers on their journey to independence. The videos were used in the framework of the Workshops and targeted at the care leavers' active involvement during the Workshops.

[5]. Trainer Material: Presentations, activity books, attendance lists and participants lists were among the materials produced at this stage in order to facilitate and standardize the delivery of the Life Skills Workshops. The materials targeted at the trainers undertaking the Workshops.

[6]. the Trainers' Guide: The Trainers' Guide included the necessary information which all trainers should take into account prior to the delivery of the workshops, so as to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process designed for care leavers. It has been developed in English and it will be translated and adapted to the Now What? partner languages so as to be implemented and used in all participating countries accordingly, even after the end of the project. The Guide was the basic educational material during to the "Train-the-Trainer" seminar, where trainers from the participating countries were educated on the forthcoming implementation of the Workshops.

3.3. Life Skills Workshops

The Life Skills Workshops were the core and kernel of the "Now What?" project. The aim of the Life Skills Workshops was to reach care leavers in the partner countries and to adequately prepare them so that they may successfully pursue an independent life.

A total of fifteen (15) Life Skills Workshops took place in the following countries, by the relevant child care institutions. More analytically, the Life Skills Workshops were distributed among partners as follows:

- six (6) Life Skills Workshops in Romania,
- three (3) Life Skills Workshops in Portugal,
- three (3) Life Skills Workshops in Greece, and
- three (3) Life Skills Workshops in Albania

A total of one hundred fifty (150) young care leavers participated and benefited from the Life Skills Workshops. Thus, each workshop addressed to a total of ten (10) young care leavers.

The duration of each Life Skills Workshop was eighty (80) hours. The thematic content of each workshop was comprised of the following:

- The Legal Stuff: Entitlements and Obligations,
- Money Management,
- Maintaining a Home,
- Looking after One's Well-Being,
- Employment,
- Education,
- Having a Good Lifestyle,
- Navigating Local Services, and
- Communication and Interpersonal Relationships.

The Life Skills Workshops took place in the premises of the residential institutions where care leavers reside. This integration of services and parallel dealing of all issues related to the ability to lead an independent life increases the likelihood of meeting participants' multiple needs. Providing these services in one location also gives youth the opportunity to develop sustained attachments to their adult service providers.

During the Workshops, the care leavers were provided with the Handbook and the Toolkit, while trainers used the previously developed Trainer Guide, Trainers materials and the videos.

3.4. The Mentoring Component

In order to support the transition of care leavers into adulthood, the partnership developed another set of services directed to this group. It involved the development and implementation of a mentoring process between a care leaver (mentee) and a more experienced and mature adult (mentor). Mentoring, as a positive, structured relationship, can provide children and adolescents in care with adult support to develop the skills they need to make a successful transition to independence.

In order to develop and establish the mentoring component of the Now What? Project the educational and care institutions of the partnership joined forces by undertaking different tasks:

- The educational institutions provided the theoretical background of the mentoring component, including an extensive guide to the mentoring process, the Mentoring Protocol, and all the relevant documents for the implementation of the process, while
- The care institutions proceeded with the delivery of the mentoring sessions, which took place in their premises. They organized the major elements of the process, such as the recruitment of mentors, their training, the matching between mentors and mentees and the mentoring practical procedures and processes.

The basic document which guided this process was the After Care Plan (described below), which was the main focus of the discussions which took place between the mentor and the mentee.

3.5. The After Care Plans

The objective of the After Care Plans is to provide a bridge for young people from care to post-care services and eventually to independence. The After Care Plans constitute an important tool to support the more concerted transition planning efforts that need to take place as a young person reaches mid to late adolescence and eventually adulthood and independence.

The After Care Plan enables young people not only to be aspirational but give them the confidence and ability to achieve their goals throughout their lives, so making an exceptional difference to the individual. This methodology was built on the principle of both support to and challenge of, young people leaving care using confidence and innovation to create the required interventions that make a difference.

Mentors worked with the young person to develop the After Care Plan. This After Care Plan, as developed by the Now What? Project highlights the important areas of a young person's development by using the following seven domains to identify the areas that must be considered and acted upon if a young person is to be supported to grow and mature while preparing for after care life. These domains are:

- Health
- Emotional and behavioral development
- Education
- Family and social relationships
- Identity
- Social presentation
- Self-care skills.

More indicatively, through the After Care Plans both prospective care leavers and mentors will be in a position to identify the strategies and actions required to build the young person's independent living skills including:

- social skills to help the young person negotiate with peers and other adults in the community.
- budgeting and managing money.
- managing family and other relationships.
- living with people and resolving conflict.
- cooking, housekeeping and self-care.
- understanding the rights and responsibilities of an adult.

For each life area, the After Care Plan needs to document:

- the young person's needs
- how they will be responded to
- by whom
- by when.

The time dedicated for the development of the After Care Plans through the mentoring process was designed to last for 6 months, during which mentors and mentees was planned to meet every week or every second week. A total number of 120 care leavers from the participating countries took part in the mentoring process which resulted to an equal number of After Care Plans.

4. The Experience from the Implementation of the Now What approach in Each National Context

As already described, the Now What approach and its components was implemented in the four participating countries (Romania, Albania, Portugal and Greece) in the period 2019- 2020. Each national team consisted of an educational institution and a care institution cooperated in the delivery of the project outputs and activities, according to the specific circumstances and characteristics of each national setting.

Based on reports and evaluations by all participating organizations, as well as by all people involved in the implementation of the approach (such as care leavers, trainers, mentors, care professional, etc), the experiences gained have been gathered and presented below. It is important to point out that the following part of the European Set of Standards is targeted to any interested organization which decides to replicate the approach in any other national setting and country.

The experiences from each participating country are as follows:

The Albanian experience

During the implementation of “Now What” project, the empowerment and the involvement of young people without parental care of various public and non-public care institutions of Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan, Saranda districts of the country was achieved. Beside young people, different stakeholders and care professionals contributed in direct service provision and increased their capacities regarding the situation of young people without parental care and especially on the topic of preparing them to leave care. The target groups involved in the implementation of the Now What? approach in Albania were as follows:

- During the project lifetime, 107 young people were reached through peer to peer research. They contributed by sharing their ideas and opinions for improvement of the situation of young people without parental care and preparation of situation analyses of Albanian young people leaving care.
- Through peer research young people ensured the interviews and inputs by 20 co-workers (youth leaders, managers, and caretakers) from public and nonpublic care institutions
- Direct project beneficiaries were in total 43 young people who were empowered and affected positively by project actions. They increased their capacities through the Life Skills Seminars, the Mentoring component and the support for the development of their Individual Development Plans.
- On the other side the project informed, trained and involved more than 30 professionals to contribute to the support provision on leaving care and after care preparation of young people. These professionals trained young people, offered mentoring and support for leaving care and after care preparation.

Care leavers

The feedback received from the care leavers on the Life Skills Workshops was positive and they perceived the Life Skills Workshops to be very useful for their preparation of leaving care and after care. They were satisfied with the quality of seminars, preparation of the trainers, educational materials and handouts. The only thing they commented to be improved was the logistic aspects of the seminars, related to the conference/meeting rooms, the coffee break etc. The majority of sessions took place in the premises of the SOS CV AL (in youth communities and SOS village in Tirana) to make it more attractive. Some of the sessions took place outside of SOS in other premises, conference rooms etc., supported by other financial resources of the organization.

Regarding the mentoring process, SOS CV AL was very carefully to inform and receive the input of young people in each stage of the project implementation. So before the mentoring process started, 3 orientation sessions were organized with young people to inform them regarding the goal of this process, roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees, introduction of “Now What” project, characteristics of mentor, what they would like to discuss & points of interest, logistical aspects, frequency of meetings and so that they receive their approval for this process. In that moment the only concern they expressed was that the role of the mentor had to be very clear and not to duplicate the role of the youth leader or care givers. After the end of the process, the young people were enthusiastic and said that mentoring has improved and supported them in different aspects of their life. They thought the the relation mentor – mentee for their future after care would be very helpful as well.

Trainers

On February 2019, three youth leaders, staff of the SOS CV Albania, participated and increased their capacities during the train-the-trainer seminar in Lisbon. Based on that training they organized the Life Skills Workshops to empower young people without parental care. Each of the trainers delivered the 10 educational units, based in the module of “Training Curriculum and Materials” produced by the project. The trainers highly appreciated the educational materials, the way each module was organized, making the assimilation and provision of the knowledge to the young people very easy. The materials were very practical and organized in friendly version for young people with appropriate handouts.

Mentors

Based in the Mentoring Protocol, during the training of Mentors 25 co-workers of SOS CV Albania were involved from different positions of the organization. The training was highly evaluated and they thought that it developed their skills. After the training, the matching Mentor-Mentee took place and the mentoring process for young people started. It was challenging in the beginning because it was very important for professionals to have and combine appropriate time with young people. Obstacles were overcome by discussions and finding solutions in each pair (mentor-mentee). The mentoring experience resulted to be supportive and accomplished its objective for empowerment of young people leaving care. This relationship/process for some pairs resulted to be very strong, so this cooperation will exist even after the project is completed. After Care Plans or Individual Development Plans were developed for each young people.

Regarding the mentoring process, mentors pointed out that the preparation of young people to leave care is a long process and it is impossible to be completed for 6 months or 1 year. On the other hand, the professionals should have long term commitment and frequent contact with young people to prepare them for leaving care. They pointed out that the mentors can support youth leaders and care givers to develop After Care Plans but cannot replace their role.

Overall, the project contributed to discover the weak point of the care system and the necessity for advocacy actions to improve the situation of young people without parental care. During the seminars, trainings and workshops the necessity of quality services, improvement of policies in place for better integration in society and better preparation for independent life was emphasized.

The Romanian experience

In Romania, the Now What approach was implemented according to the project proposal. During the research phase, 60 questionnaires were applied to care leavers, to identify the needs of the beneficiaries and 12 interviews with professionals in the protection system took place, for the realization of a database with the needs of the beneficiaries, in order to prepare the working materials for the other outputs. At the same time, 3 focus groups were supported to complete the analysis of the needs of the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries, educators from residential centers and individuals from the community who have a connection to the social side participated in these focus groups.

After the development and the adaptation of the educational materials in Romanian, the Life Skills Workshops with 3 beneficiary groups of 11, 13 and 12 participants were held. There were 14 meetings with each group (6 hours for a meeting) and all meetings took place between October- November 2019.

In Romania it was decided to offer the possibility to people from the community to become mentors so, with the help of the media, the mentoring component was presented to the public. Around half of the mentors involved in the project were people from the community, who didn't know much about the child protection system before, and half are people who already used to work with children in placement centers. The mentoring process was carried out with the participation of 32 mentors and 35 young people. They participated together (individually as a mentor-mentee couple but also in small groups) at different sporting, cultural (theater) events, the Christmas fair, but also a few days in a trip to another county. At the same time, some mentors participated in the events carried out by children such as celebrations or the Christmas carols concert held by young people. At the end of the process, 35 After Care Plans were developed.

Care Leavers

During the Life Skills Workshops held with 3 beneficiary groups of 11, 13 and 12 participants, the feedback received from the participants was mostly positive, they were interested in the proposed themes. The most appreciated activities were the practical ones and the most acclaimed modules were "Money management" and "Communication and interpersonal relationships". The care leavers were excited about the program, and most of them at the end of the project would have wanted to continue the project. Some of the positive aspects that they highlighted were: the easy to understand language and

information presented in the workshops, the fact that they could easily discuss about the aspects of life that really matters to them, that they were encouraged to speak freely and to ask questions. Another aspect was that the training was not boring, since the young people worked with materials that lifted their interest and ability to actively interact. At the end of the Workshops they felt more confident in their skills, in taking into consideration the different aspects of life and in taking the best decisions so that their plans were implemented at their best.

Regarding the mentoring process, the youngsters responded with enthusiasm to the mentoring program and they appreciated the matching phase as being very useful and considerate for their specific needs and interests. Most of the care leavers mentioned the fact that being assisted by mentors from civil society and not necessary workers from child protection services, was an empowering tool and it help them develop a deeper sense of belonging to society. The care leavers were excited by their mentors, most of them were surprised by how well they were matched with their mentors. They felt that there was a real connection between them, that they have what to learn from them. And because the mentors were in some aspect similar to them it was for them like an example of what they could turn out in life if they are consistent with what they want to become in life. The mentors were open to discuss about different things, they were easy to reach, they organized different meetings with different purposes but all to the liking of the teenagers included in the program.

Generally, the care leavers were very happy because they had the chance to be a part of this great project. They were impressed about the activities, the information, the quality of the mentors and about the fact that the relation they bounded with the mentors lasts also in the present.

Trainers

Trainers thought that the educational and supporting materials were very well structured, with easy to understand information. A big plus was that the supporting materials, the lesson plans provided also different types of activities to do with the students and also some examples of questions to rise up the curiosity of the students and to introduce the topics of discussions. In the workshops the trainers benefited from information that improved their activity, not only with the young people in the project but also with the other young people in the residential system. At the same time, they could have a more global picture of all the areas that a young person leaving the protection system must approach and to which they must adapt in the future.

Mentors

All the mentors appreciated the mentoring process and they understood at a different level the child protection system and the situation of children living in placement centers. They were very enthusiastic and they all got involved in all the activities proposed by the team (train the mentors activity, visiting the children and keeping contact with them through social media, going out with the children – visiting the Mall, the Christmas Market, the city, going in an one day trip, going to sport competitions and at the theatre etc.). During the project, the mentors were really happy to have the possibility to be involved in this project and in children's life. More than that, the teenagers involved in this project, as mentees, were very open to the mentors advices and to their life experiences. For example, a teenager whose mentor is a policeman said that he would like to become policeman and a young girl whose mentor works in IT business would like to start building sites.

Mentors' suggestion was to find ways to promote more the results of the project, in order to attract, even after the project, mentors from community that should keep inspire the teenagers from the placement centers.

Overall, the implementation of the Now What approach in Romania has been a positive experience. The project was useful for the protection systems and their beneficiaries because it establishes concrete benchmarks, guidelines and working materials that can be understood and applied by everyone involved. The project offers, both to the specialists and to the beneficiaries of the protection system, certain skills and knowledge with which to work in the present but also in the future. The trainings for educators have improved the perception on the needs of the beneficiaries but also the approach regarding the independent life skills.

On the other hand, young people who have spent much of their childhood and adolescence in residential systems benefited from a different perspective when they are in direct contact with a person in the community (mentor), when they received concrete information from all areas of life, but especially when they have the opportunity to decide and implement decisions about their own future. These decisions are not easy to make, often create anxiety, feelings of abandonment, but when the young person is accompanied by people with experience and desire to get involved, things become simpler and less frightening.

The Greek experience

The Now What approach was implemented in homes of 'The Smile of the Child' all over Greece with the participation of 30 Care leavers aged 14-17 years old. These care leavers participated in the Life Skills Workshops and the mentoring process. Trainers were chosen among the care professionals working in the different care centers throughout the country. On the other hand, the recruitment of mentors was done from the pool of staff worked inside of homes of the organization 'The Smile of the Child' as educators of Care leavers but also as their referral persons. This staff was directly connected with the daily life of Care leavers and due to the mentoring process, they had the chance to deep more in their relationship with children.

Care leavers

Care leavers responded very positively to the Life Skills Workshops. Through the implementation of these workshops children managed to cover their questions, have thought and found solutions to issues that every adult may take for granted, like the existence of family doctors or even the opening of a bank account. The topics of financial management, housing, studies and professional rehabilitation were the most interesting for Care leavers. Training tools included audiovisual techniques as well as it is noted that the use of new technologies contributed positively in the implementation of Life Skills Workshops, such as for example internet use. The experiential exercises-i.e. role playing, the groups discussions and the videos were some of the contents which Care leavers liked most. In general, the handbook and the training materials were very informative and led to harmonious discussions with the Care leavers while they were very helpful for the trainers.

Regarding the mentoring process, Care leavers felt that there was continuity in practice with the proper preparation for adult life. The most that Care leavers liked was the individual meetings and the personal discussion and that they could trust a person beyond the daily routine in homes, their mentor. The drafting of After Care Plans helped Care leavers to get prepared and organized related to their rights and obligations as future adults.

In general, though the project's activities, Care leavers managed dealing with the idea of their adulthood and expressed their fears, concerns and even their dreams for their future life and independence. During Life skills workshops, Care leavers realized their common concerns but also they shared their personal knowledge which was useful for other group members. There was team working and this was motivated them to attend all the workshops. Additionally, during the mentoring process personal relationships based on trust were developed and as a result, topics that were difficult to be discussed in front of other children, now Care leavers had the opportunity to discuss with their mentors. During the implementation of the activities, Care leavers felt stressed in the beginning but afterwards they were released and felt secure to discuss their concerns for their adulthood with their trainers and their mentors. They expressed their willingness to continue discussions concerning their autonomous living and after the end of the project.

Trainers

Trainers thought that the topics of the Life skills workshops were very well targeted and met the needs of Care leavers. The provision of a pre-determined organizational chart to follow, helped the trainers. The Handbook was highly evaluated, although extra educational materials were necessary for the trainers, especially related to county-specific information. In general the training material was helpful and structured for them in order to organize the workshops.

Mentors

On behalf of mentors, the mentoring process had a positive impact on them as well as it met needs of children for their better preparation in adulthood. The Mentoring Protocol was very useful tool for mentors. Even if the time was limited, the mentors respected and pursued the mentoring process with the Care leavers and tried to cover most of their concerns via the discussions during their personal meetings. Through the mentoring activities, Care leavers developed skills and competences as well as improved their personal relationships so that they can cope with the interactions of both peers and adults. Other positive aspect of the mentoring activities was the drafting of After Care Plans which gave the opportunity to children to feel self-confident and to deal with difficulties which may face in order to get integrated smoothly in society.

Overall, the Now What approach had a positive impact on the people involved. Both activities, i.e. the Life skills workshops and the mentoring process were considered useful for care leavers. Project activities will be implemented in the future with some adjustments of the content and the educational and supporting materials according to the needs and capabilities of a new generation of children.

The Portuguese experience

Due to different reasons, including the COVID-19 crisis, the Workshops and the mentoring process were not implemented in Portugal. The Portuguese partners participated in the development and the adaptation of the educational materials and the Mentoring Protocol.

Still, the feedback received has been positive. It was thought that the Now What project is a very inspiring project for all Associations, politicians, workers in the field of alternative care that must face the issues raised by the autonomization process of the “care leavers”. This is a social, a communitarian issue that deserves to be addressed and needs a specific attention.

Tips and recommendations by project partners

One of the basic aims of the present document, the European Set of Standards, is to provide the methodology and the process so that other potential European stakeholders apply the Now What? approach in different settings. Based on the experiences of the project partners and on the evaluations received by all people involved in the process, the following tips and recommendations have been made regarding different aspects of the process:

Recommendations on the educational materials:

- Enough time should be dedicated to the adaptation and the localization of the educational materials so that they reflect the specific situation of the country where the approach is to be replicated. Issues such as the issuing of legal documents, opening a bank account and receiving housing, financial or other benefits are country specific and special attention should be provided.
- The educational materials should be constantly revised and reviewed for future use, since the information provided needs to be updated.
- The structure of the Lesson Plans and the Curriculum was highly valued by both trainers and trainees and has been considered very helpful for the delivery of the Life Skills Workshops

Recommendations on the educational process, the Life Skills Workshops:

- The content of the workshops was highly valued by the participating care leavers. The Units which received the highest evaluation were “money management”, “education and training”, “health” and “interpersonal relationships”. However, a few care leavers and their trainers commented that they wanted more “practical activities: during the Workshops. For example, when the “Employment” unit was discussed, visiting different companies or work places has been suggested.
- Enough time should be dedicated for the preparation of both the trainers and the trainees prior to the commencement of the Workshops. Trainers should be trained on the specific educational materials (curriculum, lesson plans, the Handbook and the supplementary materials), so that they feel capable and confident to use them in the classroom. On the other hand, trainees, the care leavers, should be informed on the process so as to know what will be provided to them, their rights and their obligations regarding the process. Introductory sessions with experiential activities and ice-breaking games should precede the actual implementation of the Workshops.

- The planning of the timing of the Workshops is crucial for their success. When they take place during the school year, care leavers tend to participate less, they do not prepare their homework for the workshops and they might complain on the time pressure and the work overload to fulfill both the school and the workshops obligations. When the Workshops take place during holidays (e.g. Christmas or summer), trainees are more willing to fully participate. Moreover enough time between training sessions should be foreseen, so that care leavers engage positively in the Workshops and do not consider them as another one of their obligations.
- The practical issues for the delivery of the Workshops should be well considered. Issues such as the room or space where the workshops take place, the breaks, the coffee or refreshments provided should be planned and handled well in advance.
- The time frame of the Workshops should be communicated to all people involved (trainers, care leavers, care personnel) for the proper implementation of all activities, including the mentoring process. Moreover, the timing and duration of the Workshops should be flexible in order to accommodate the needs of the care leavers.

Recommendations on the mentoring process:

- Following the Romanian example, bringing mentors from the community, and not care professionals, was considered among the best practices of the project. These mentors needed to receive specific training on the care system of their country and should be acquainted and familiarized with the operation, policies and procedures of the care institutions in order to effectively take up the role of the mentor. Care leavers highly evaluated these adults, who provided life examples which care leavers respected and looked up to.
- One of the key factors for the success of the mentoring process was the matching procedures. In all countries the matching procedure between mentors and mentees went smoothly and its effectiveness was highlighted as a key issue for success in all national settings.
- The timing of the mentoring sessions is another issue which needs to be considered. The frequency of the sessions should be decided between the mentor and the mentee, based on their schedules and their obligations, so as to avoid instances of one person not appearing for the session.
- Both mentors and mentees should be well prepared for the sessions, prior to their commencement. Mentors should be trained on the mentoring methodology, their rights and their obligations and mentees should be informed on the role and the framework in which the mentor offers his/her time and services. Care leavers should have a clear idea on who the mentor is, so as to avoid misunderstandings. Care leavers should distinguish the role of the mentor with the role of the care giver, the person of reference or the director of the care institution.
- The role of mentor on the preparation of After Care Plans needs to be clear for all people involved in the provision of care to care leavers. Mentors could contribute and support, but care givers, care professionals or youth leaders, have the main responsibility to develop, to lead and follow up the After Care Plans.
- The completion of the After Care Plans should be a flexible process. It is not obligatory for all care leavers to complete all areas of the plans. Depending on their age, their education, the relationships with their families and other factors, care leavers should feel free to discuss and prepare their pathway on any of the issues presented in the After Care Plans, in any order they wish- always directed and guided by their mentors.

- The mentoring process should be an ongoing process without very strict time limits, in order to be effective, fruitful and pleasant for both the mentors and the mentees.
- The role of the coordinator/ supervisor of the mentoring process is key for the success. Issues which might arise during the process, for example, the fact that in several instances the care leaver didn't show up for the established meetings or the fact that some of the mentors were reluctant in addressing some basic counseling needs expressed by the youngsters, need to be addressed to the supervisor so that they are resolved properly.
- It is very probable that care leavers initially feel pressured or not comfortable to discuss their future plans with the mentor. It is up to each mentor to create a positive, welcoming and non-judgmental environment so that the care leaver feels at ease to reveal his/her wishes and fears.
- Apart from the After Care Plan, which was considered as very helpful, suggestions were made for the development of an "Emergency Plan" in order to keep it sustainable under any living conditions. This could be a new annex to the After Care Plan.
- After the development of the After Care Plans, a follow-up process should take place in order to support care leavers in the actualization or adaptation of the these plans.
- Many care leavers and mentors expressed their wish to continue the mentoring process after the end of the project, a fact that implies that the specific process was one of the project's highlights.

5. Policy Recommendations

Whereas children generally leave their family at the age of 25-27, depending on cultural and social-economic characteristics of society, care leavers are too often expected to step into independent life much earlier, often already at the age of 17-18. The existence of this gap is to a great extent due to the often restrictive public regulations to which child protection institutions are subject, informed by the misguided notion that ‘instant adulthood’ is attained simply by crossing an arbitrary chronological threshold. The early age of care leaving compounds the issues children in care have to deal with as a result of trauma which they have undergone in the past. It is the ethically undeniable – and so far only scarcely fulfilled – responsibility of society, and more in particular of the public social safety net, to address this issue, i.e. smoothly guide future care leavers through the stages from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, and eventually assist adult care leavers in their search of an empowered and stable existence.

In this regard, civil society organizations and academia involved in “Now What?” project have made the following policy recommendations to relevant authorities at national, sub-national and supranational or intergovernmental level:

1. Authorities competent for child protection and issues related to the protection of care leavers are called upon at national and sub-national levels, in the full spirit of subsidiarity, and in accordance with the principles of Human Rights and Children Rights, as laid down among other in UN conventions and in EU legal instruments:

* to embrace in their educational system and child care mechanisms the operational tools developed in the “Now What?” project as a source of inspiration and reference,

* to actively integrate the support of care leavers in their agendas of social policy development, as a prominent component of child care,

* for that matter, to create an adequate legal framework, leading to the establishment of a safety net which provides indispensable stability and gradually and smoothly guides children in care from sufficiently early age through the transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood and care leaving. Such a legal framework must fundamentally:

- remove the artificial separation and bureaucratic obstacles between childhood and adulthood services for care leavers by aligning and amending regulations to ensure that fostering services and residential child care provision can legally provide care for young people, up to the age of 21 as a minimum default position;
- enhance a stable environment of care leavers by ensuring the continuity of caring relationships, contact and mentoring persons regarding housing, finance, employment and education;
- generate integrated procedures and coordinated planning between authorities and institutions responsible for housing and social work, resulting in shared strategic objectives and shared operational agendas, including addressing issues of care leavers between the ages of 21 and 26;

- develop and streamline a variety of financial supports available in a straightforward way to care leavers up to the age of 26;
- require corporate providers to plan and deliver integrated services to care leavers transitioning from care to adulthood, with focus on options on housing and accommodation, higher education, labor market guidance and an aftercare engagement up to the age of 26,

* to specifically earmark financial means accordingly, in order to turn the above-mentioned components of a legal framework into an effectively operational set of structures, mechanisms and instruments, underpinned by a values-driven and rights-based practice culture.

* to create an independent mechanism of screening and oversight for the effectiveness and implementation of the above-mentioned legal framework and of the ensuing operational structures, mechanisms and instruments, also involving key stakeholders, providers and care leavers themselves.

2. EU supranational institutions and relevant intergovernmental bodies and agencies, which embrace the fundamental human and children rights, are called upon:

* to actively contribute to strengthened political awareness and attention among their member States or participating States for the preparation trajectory and support of care leavers,

* to screen, as part of the monitoring mechanisms of which they already dispose internally, the progress of their member States or participating States in achieving the objectives as set out in paragraph 3, above.

Finally, one of the lessons learned is that serious investment in the transformation of systems of care without a clear political decision, and without a budgeted plan of transformation, approved at the highest level is not recommended. Unless governments make a clear decision, supported by sustainable funding, for the development of community-based, family-focused and other services, there will be insufficient lobbying for EU funds to be invested in this new direction and investments such as EU funds will continue to feed the existing system (https://europe.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Children_under_3.pdf).

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