

## Leaving Care – Current challenges and rays of hope

Presentation for the Conference on Quality in Alternative Care of FICE European Network by Bettina Terp

Leaving home is a challenging time for all young people, whatever their circumstances. For care leavers, without the help of a supportive family network to draw on, “challenging” is not strong enough. It is a precarious period when their future can hang in the balance.

Children in care must usually leave the institution at their eighteenth birthday, while youngsters, who live in their families, start their autonomous life at the average age of twenty four. It is no surprise that research studies prove that the group of care leavers shows a higher risk of social exclusion, a lower level of education, a higher risk of poverty and a higher rate of mortality.

When we talk about care leaver, we talk about young people who have experienced a certain time of their life in care.

I would like to quote an article from Scotland, written by a care leaver for the Care leaver’s annual lecture 2016:

“The statistics for care experienced people in Scotland are unacceptable. When a child enters care, they have often experienced the worst things that life can throw at them – but the system sometimes repeats the trauma of their earlier life, exacerbating instead of healing these wounds. People with care experience are overrepresented in prison, criminal and homelessness statistics and underrepresented in employment and education. Very few are known to police or the judicial system when they enter the care system, but more than half are known to these services when they leave.”

So one conclusion for me is that the discussion about care leaving has to start early and has to be part of the entire care process.

In 2007, three organisations – SOS Children’s Villages, IFCO and FICE – released the quality4children standards. These are European wide standards for quality in care.

In the quality4children standards, the issue of leaving care has been discussed in a special chapter.

This standard area includes the four following standards:

### **Standard 15: The leaving-care process is thoroughly planned and implemented.**

- Based on the care plan and together with the child/young adult, the caregiver plans and implements the leaving-care process. The implementation of this process takes place gradually so far as it is in the best interests of the child. The child/young adult has a voice in determining to what extent his/her family of origin should participate in the planning and implementation of the leaving-care process. If necessary, the caregiver consults a multi-professional team.
- The child/young adult is recognised as an expert regarding the quality of his/her care. The caregiver asks the child/young adult to evaluate the care quality. The caregiver passes this feedback on to the care organisation in order that the organisation can consider it for further developing the quality of the care system and the respective care model.
- The leaving-care process is based on the individual care plan. The care plan defines the developmental status of the child/young adult, sets objectives and measures and clarifies the

resources needed to support the child/young adult during the leaving-care process. The care plan and its implementation are regularly evaluated. The care plan also considers the future life of the child/young adult after leaving care, in terms of defining guidelines for after-care.

- The return to the family of origin or movement to another placement is thoroughly prepared. Should the child/young adult return to his/her family of origin or move to another placement, Child Protection Services, the present and the future caregiver as well as the family of origin cooperate. The child/young adult actively participates in the decision-making process and in the preparation according to his/her level of understanding.
- A farewell is arranged for the child/young adult leaving care. An appropriate farewell get-together is organised for the child/young adult to mark the beginning of his/her next living phase. This is done according to the common traditions of the child's background and aiming to fulfil the child's/young adult's wishes.
- The child/young adult has access to support and counselling after having left out-of-home care. Child Protection Services and the care organisation provide after-care support and counselling.

**Standard 16: Communication in the leaving-care process is conducted in a useful and appropriate manner**

- The relevant information is managed professionally. Child Protections Services, the care organisation and the caregiver recognise the importance of providing the child/young adult and his/her family of origin with all relevant information. Child Protection Services professionally manages all relevant information. It ensures confidentiality, proper documentation and access for the involved parties.
- The child/young adult is properly informed about the leaving-care process. The caregiver ensures that the child/young adult is informed and understands all relevant information regarding the leaving-care process. In particular, the child/young adult is informed about the different possibilities and aspects of a future life in which he/she either becomes independent, returns to the family of origin or moves to another placement.
- A set of requirements is considered in ensuring appropriate communication. All relevant parties involved in supporting the child/young adult during the leaving-care process meet at least the following requirements:
  - They are skilled to use language appropriate to the child's/young adult's way of thinking. They establish a close relationship with the child/young adult, have good listening skills and are understanding, empathetic and patient in order to make the child/young adult feel at ease;
  - they create a friendly and comfortable communication environment;
- Child, family of origin, caregiver, care organisation and Child Protection Services work together. Cooperation among the relevant parties involved in supporting the child/young adult during the leaving-care process is strengthened by an exchange of relevant information, appropriate communication and mutual trust. They:
  - comply with legislation, regulations and Q4C standards;
  - include this standard (16) in the instructions and working methods of Child Protection Services, care organisations and caregivers;
  - Are part of a child-care network.

### **Standard 17: The child/young adult is empowered to participate in the leaving-care process**

- The following requirements are considered to ensure the child's/young adult's participation. All relevant parties involved in the leaving-care process consider and meet at least the following requirements ensuring that:
  - the child/young adult exercises his/her rights to participate in the planning and implementation of his/her leaving-care process;
  - the child/young adult is listened to and encouraged to express his/her plans, doubts and expectations;
  - the child/young adult is supported in taking decisions according to his/her level of understanding;
  - the child/young adult is recognised as the expert of his/her life;
  - the family of origin participates in the leaving-care process;
  - the child/young adult is given the opportunity to determine to what extent the family of origin may be involved;
  - the child/young adult is listened to and supported in bureaucratic and juridical procedures;
- The child/young adult receives all relevant information. The caregiver ensures that the child/young adult is provided with all relevant information in order to support him/her in making decisions during the leaving-care process. He/she ensures that the child/young adult understands the information provided.
- The planning and implementation of the leaving-care process is based on the individual care plan. The child/young adult participates in the development of his/her care plan. The care plan takes into account his/her views as well as objectives and the resources needed to thoroughly plan and implement the leaving-care process.

### **Standard 18: Follow-up, continuous support and contact possibilities are ensured**

- Follow-up and support are based on an after-care plan. The care organisation and the caregiver together with the child/young adult develop and implement an after-care plan. This plan builds on the already existing individual care plan. The methods used in establishing an after-care plan are outlined in the written statement of the care organisation. It is important that the after-care plan has an individual focus and integrates the child's/young adult's background. Generally, the after-care plan defines the developmental status of the child/young adult, sets objectives and measures and clarifies the resources needed to support the child/young adult after having left care.
- Follow-up and support of the child/young adult is ensured. The caregiver follows up and, if requested, supports the child/young adult in accordance with the after-care plan. He/she has the necessary resources for this. The caregiver strives to maintain contact with the child/young adult.
- The child/young adult has the opportunity to maintain contact with his/her emotional network. The former care organisation provides resources to maintain contact between the child/young adult and his/her emotional network relevant during his/her time in care. The former caregiver facilitates this contact.

Not only the quality4children standards have dealt with the issue of leaving care. Last year, prior to the FICE Congress in August, the youth exchange programme “Be the Change” took place in Vienna. 53 young adults aged 17-25 from 15 countries all over the world who have experienced care discussed the needs of care leavers. In the nine days of the programme, the youngsters developed standards for care leavers which then were presented to the participants of the congress. I would like to introduce those standards to you:

1. Every care leaver should be involved in their own care-leaving plan and have a say in what has to be done.
2. Every care leaver should have equal rights, opportunities, access to social benefits and be adequately informed about this right.
3. When applying for college/university every care leaver should have benefits and access to scholarship sponsored either by governmental or private organizations.
4. To be able to find and succeed in a job, every care leaver should get help to become aware of and get recognized with their potentials, so that they gather the chance to improve them.
5. Free health insurance for everyone.
6. To live your life, every care leaver needs to feel connected to some people they can rely on.
7. The workers supporting care leavers should be motivated, qualified, supportive and supervised.
8. To take care for one’s own, care leavers need to have knowledge about life skills and how to organize their daily routine, like in a peer to peer training.
9. Care leavers need to know how to ensure their capability to keep a roof over their head.
10. After leaving care, society should provide the opportunity to turn to a mentor who guides and supports emotionally, if needed.

FICE International has adopted these ten standards and is promoting them in every member country.

Although having standards for leaving care, there is still what Jennifer Davidson from CELCIS is calling the ‘implementation gap’. This phrase defines the space between theory and practice. Every practitioner in the field knows that there is still a lot of work to be done. So where are the rays of hope, I have mentioned in my headline?

Let me just give you a short overview of some good practice models to proof that the implementation gap can be closed by promising projects.

I would like to start with a project, I learned to know in the Netherlands. Cardea, a provider of out of home care in the city of Leiden, started a mentoring programme for youngsters, who are about to leave care. The project is called “Are you ready?” It is a peer-to-peer training, delivered by young people, who have left care already. The training has been developed by the care leavers themselves and tries to reflect on what young people need, when they are leaving residential child care. It deals with questions of daily life, like:

- How much is my monthly budget?
- How will I finance my future life?
- What are the costs for a flat?
- What are the costs for health insurance?
- Where can I get assistance in critical phases of my life?

These are just examples, but all these and more questions are discussed in workshops to enable the future care leavers to get an overview of the requirements they will have to meet when trying to live an independent life.

As the workshops are delivered by former care leavers, the acceptance of the youngster in care is higher and the needs of the future care leavers are met in most of the cases.

During the FICE Congress 2016, the first FICE award was granted to a German project called "Careleaver e.V."

This is an association of care experienced young adults, who are engaged in lobbying for the needs of care leavers. They want to draw attention to the situation of care leavers and are organising activities for and with care leavers.

FICE International wanted to acknowledge this network of highly motivated young adults because of the importance of raising the voice for care leavers and making the needs of this vulnerable group public.

Last but not least I would like to mention a project which will start next year in my hometown Vienna. During the last years, we experienced the lack of appropriate living facilities for care leaver with psychiatric problems.

Coming of age is a challenge for every youngster, even more challenging for children in residential care but almost an invincible barrier, if there are additional psychic deficits. To solve this problem we will start a so called transition facility where young people can start to live at the age of 16 and stay until they will be 25. They will live in training flats and will receive social pedagogic, therapeutic, pharmacologic and psycho-educative care. Hopes are high, that the outcome will be independent living young adults who have learned to overcome the disadvantages they have had to face.

We are here to talk about quality in alternative care and please allow me to stress this matter just one more time: If we want to talk about a successful care leaving process, we will have to start this discussion earlier in the care process. We need best quality in care to provide all necessary resources for the young people who will be future care leaver, so they will be prepared and enabled to live their lives independently.

But we have to be aware that eighteen must not be the borderline for the care system. Young adults without a family environment have a right on support even when they have to leave the care system. In my opinion this right is essential, not only from an ethical view, but also from an economic view. We invest a lot of money during the care process and we often toss this money out of the window, if care leavers are left alone.