

Changes in the approach of social work with young people in out-of-home care in Riga

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Abstract. At the end of 2019, an innovative approach was launched in social work with young people in out-of-home care in Riga. This approach included prevention, changes in the form and methods of social work, and planning for the transition period. To implement the new approach, a new structure – the Youth Support Centre – was established. In 2022, a study with a mixed research methodology was conducted to evaluate the impact of the Youth Support Centre’s approach and activities on changes in the social functioning of young people. The analysis revealed several significant findings that shed light on the factors influencing social functioning among young people, which also indicates the necessary changes in the administration of social services.

1 Introduction

Young people in out-of-home care constitute a distinct target group for social work due to several reasons, which are determined by multiple factors. These factors include the specific age stage, challenges associated with separation from their biological family (that is why target group is also called young people in out-of-home care), and the transition from childhood to adulthood, which on its merits includes the requirement for independent living skills. Substance abuse, homelessness, domestic violence, emotional disturbance, poverty, and incarceration are common issues faced by children who have been removed from their biological families. The children also experience the consequences of these problems, including attachment issues, trust difficulties, identity problems, and various other challenges. Many of these children require individual professional assistance to overcome the traumatic effects of neglect and abuse they have experienced [1]. As a target group, they commonly experience worse outcomes, including lower likelihood of being in education or employment. Additionally, they face higher risks of homelessness and suicide [2]. Likewise, international studies indicate a considerable risk of social exclusion (material disadvantage and marginalisation) among out-of-home care leavers [3]. All these circumstances contribute to a unique combination of challenges for social workers and social service administrators. In November 2019, substantial changes were introduced in the field of social work concerning young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independent living in Riga. To implement new approach, the Youth Support Centre [4] was established as a structural unit of the Children and Youth Centre of Riga Municipality [5].

1.1 Topicality of the problem

The Welfare Department of the Riga City Council [6] consistently conducts monitoring of the social services provided within the municipality. As part of this monitoring, it has been observed for several consecutive years that not all young people who have been placed in out-of-home care have availed themselves of the opportunities to receive the guarantees (cash benefits) provided by the state upon reaching the age of majority [7]. It was also discovered that social casework is only conducted with a small portion of young people. For instance, in 2019, it was carried out with 6% (34), and in 2018, with 13% (71) of young people [7]. This indicated that a considerable number of young people “disappear” from the social support system after leaving out-of-home care. This observation, considering the problems and challenges faced by this target group, highlighted the inadequacy of the then existing social work approach in meeting their needs.

1.2 Comparison between the old and new approaches

In 2019, until November 1, social work with young people after out-of-home care was carried out by twelve Riga Social Service social workers in eleven Territorial centres. In 2019, 530 young people were in contact with social services, social case work was carried out with 34 or 6% of them. Only 90% of young adults applied for social guarantees (benefits). Social work with the target group used decentralized approach in eleven Territorial centres of Riga Social Service and provided that Social Work with a young person after out-of-home care begins after reaching the age of majority and when the young person has started an independent life. The social worker worked with the young people who come to him.

In Latvia, there is a system of social guarantees, which includes universal cash benefits for starting an independent life, which are granted to all young people after out-of-home care. This means that they are easy to obtain and only require the young person to come to the municipal Social Service. Often the guarantees provided by the state – cash benefits were the main motivator for a young person to turn to the Social Service and contact a social worker. After the young person came to the social worker to receive state social guarantees, the main form of social work used by the social workers of the Social Service was social work with a case. This form of social work includes the role of the social worker as an expert because the social worker is the one who manages the social case, evaluates the client’s social situation, is responsible for organizing the process and performing certain tasks.

Based on research, several authors have devoted attention to the problems of the transition period in social work with young people from out-of-home care to independent life. In the study, Michael J. Holosko et al. (referring to Arnett, Evans, and Seligman) to highlight that adolescence is now a longer period than in the past. This has led to the recognition of a new phase called “emerging adulthood” to address the extended duration of this life stage. However, it is crucial to consider the presence of potentially harmful environments that can negatively impact young people, including exposure to drugs, poverty, and homelessness [8]. Therefore, leaving care services can assist young people with life skills by paying particular attention to creating a friendly and supportive environment and early identification of harmful social environments. Research from Scotland indicates a significant association between preparation before leaving care and successful coping afterward. These services can also contribute to the development of social networks, relationships, and self-esteem although positive and supportive informal relationships with family members, friends, or former foster carers play a vital role in these dimensions [3]. To enhance the resilience of young individuals during their transition to

independent living, it is important to incorporate various elements into their preparation. These include providing opportunities for planning, problem-solving, and acquiring new abilities. Examples of such competencies include developing self-care skills such as personal hygiene, maintaining a balanced diet, and understanding sexual health. Additionally, practical skills such as budgeting, shopping, cooking, and cleaning should be taught, along with inter-personal skills like managing both formal and informal relationships [9].

According to a theoretical analysis by M. Holosko et al., social work interventions with young people can be categorised into two main types. The first type focuses on situations where observable disorders are present in the psychological, emotional, behavioural, or social aspects, such as depression or autism, when these problems hinder daily social functioning. The second type of intervention aims to promote optimal functioning and well-being in psychological or social domains. This approach, rooted in the strength's perspective and positive psychology, emphasizes social competence, coping skills, and positive attachments to significant individuals, all of which contribute to optimal functioning [8]. These two approaches exist on a continuum of interventions for adolescents, differing in their conceptualizations, treatment models, and desired outcomes. Interventions aimed at promoting optimal functioning and positive mental health focus on building strengths, teaching coping skills, and developing social skills to enhance daily functioning. By enhancing social competence, these interventions also aim to limit clinical dysfunction. On the other hand, interventions designed to address dysfunction base on diagnosing disorders and administering specific interventions to reduce impairment [8]. As can be seen further in this article, in the new approach to social work with young people in out-of-home care in Riga municipality, it was intended to strengthen the second type of intervention.

Traditionally, the process of social transition comprises three distinct yet interconnected stages: leaving or disengagement, the transition itself, and integration into a new or different social state. However, as emphasized by Mike Stein, Research Professor in the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York (UK), young individuals often lack the vital preparatory phase during the transition process. This phase provides them with an opportunity to pause, experience freedom, explore, introspect, take risks, and search for their identity [9]. Consequently, a logical conclusion can be drawn that, in addition to changing the intervention approach, timely outreach work with young people in the target group is imperative. This is directly associated with the concept of prevention.

Regarding prevention, interventions can occur before the initial onset of a disorder. Universal prevention aims to benefit an entire population or group, targeting individuals who have not been identified as being at risk for the specific disorder. Selective prevention targets individuals or groups with a higher-than-average risk of developing the disorder. Indicated prevention involves identifying high-risk individuals who display detectable signs or symptoms predictive of the disorder [8]. Research has shown that young people leaving care face a substantial risk of social exclusion. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that young people are well prepared and supported during these transitions, with a focus on stability [10]. Social workers play a primary role in facilitating these transitions, and the objectives of selective prevention should be considered.

Although it is recognized that young people navigate the transition to independent life and adult status with varying degrees of adaptation, many encounter difficulties in obtaining educational qualifications, accessing employment, securing permanent and suitable housing, as well as developing adequate social and everyday skills. Relatively few care leavers achieve educational qualifications, and even among those who do, their attainment falls below the national average. The educational disadvantage experienced by care leavers, further hampers their progress after leaving care. Accommodation is another

area where care leavers face challenges, although individual experiences vary. Care leavers with mental health, emotional, or behavioural difficulties are particularly vulnerable [10]. This indicates that these issues should be given the greatest attention when organizing social support for young people in out-of-home care during the transition to adulthood and independent life.

Leaving care services can assist to young people in expanding their social networks, forming relationships, and developing self-esteem. However, these aspects are linked to the presence of positive and supportive informal relationships with family members or friends. If there are no family members or friends, then the content of the social service should include activities that create such an informal support network.

Andrew Kendrick, Professor of Residential Child Care, Strathclyde University concludes that there should be a stronger focus on the transitions of children and young people to ensure the benefits of high-quality residential care are sustained as they move on to different placements, independence, or returning home. Stability during these transitions is crucial, and social workers must play a leading role in facilitating them [10]. These conclusions are consistent with the assumptions obtained in the monitoring of social services by the Welfare Department of Riga City Council.

International experiences reveal two main patterns of transition from care: accelerated and compressed, and extended and abrupt. In some countries, young people leaving care are expected to make the journey to adulthood at a younger age and in less time compared to their peers. These accelerated and compressed transitions often leave no room for returning to care in times of difficulty. Conversely, in post-soviet countries, young people may stay in institutional care until their mid-twenties but feel unprepared for adult life [3]. The evidence suggests that accelerated and compressed or extended and abrupt transitions are insufficient in adequately preparing young people for their journey to adulthood. It is important to provide young people leaving care with more gradual transitions, resembling normative transitions within their cultures. This includes giving them “psychological space” and recognizing the various stages of transition [3], similar to the concept of “emerging adulthood”. Studies conducted in the UK have revealed that leaving care prematurely, that is, before reaching the age of eighteen, is correlated with unfavourable results. These individuals, in particular, are more prone to exhibiting difficult behaviours such as engaging in criminal activities and substance abuse [11].

There is an international consensus that young people leaving care, who often have strained relationships with their families, should receive support throughout their journey into adulthood, up to the ages of 21-25, rather than just at the time of leaving care. Specialist leaving care schemes have been developed in the UK to address the core needs of care leavers, including accommodation, finance, education and career assistance, personal support networks, and health and well-being. Personal advisers are assigned to each young person leaving care to conduct needs assessments and develop pathway plans. Building inter-agency links is an important aspect of supporting young people with diverse needs such as education and health [3].

The conclusions of the aforementioned authors and studies show that a more effective approach in social work with young people in out-of-home care during the transition period to adulthood and independent living entails a focus on prevention. It includes creating a youth-friendly environment, providing individual support and mentoring, structuring and planning the transition period, and conducting regular assessments of factors such as education, employment, independent housing, and the promotion of social skills.

At the end of 2019, a new approach was launched in social work with young people in out-of-home care in Riga. It included the following significant changes: 1) Preventive work before reaching the age of majority, when the social workers make early contact with the young person before the end of out-of-home care. 2) Changes in the form and methods of

social work - centralized work organization, creating the structure Youth Support Centre, a welcoming environment as a key motivator, mentoring, and group work, the social worker as a person of trust. 3) Transition period from child to adult status. The new approach meant that the target group of social work with young people who are or have been in out-of-home care will expand to include young people aged 17-24.

In summary, the most significant changes in the approach to social work with young people in out-of-home care can be identified as follows: a shift from a decentralized social work organization to a centralized one; a change from the young person initiating contact with the social worker to social workers proactively establishing early contact with the young person before the conclusion of out-of-home care; a transition from the young person's primary motivation for engaging with social workers being benefits, to the implementation of activities that are interesting and engaging for the target group; a transition from individual work as the dominant method of social work to group work and mentoring; a shift from providing support to initiate an independent life to supporting the transition to adulthood and independent living, accompanied by ongoing follow-up once the young person has started living independently.

Such approach is in line with the directions for changes recommended in the comprehensive overview of OECD countries' policy settings and aftercare supports for care leavers. They were published in 2022 for improving support for those persons leaving out-of-home care. The directions recommend "to facilitate more gradual and flexible transitions from care; to start early preparing and planning for a young person's transition out of care, focusing on further education and work; to ensure that care leavers have an adequate social network, in particular a caring and involved adult who supports them in their transition in a similar way to a parent or caregiver might support their child; to take a holistic and flexible approach to providing support(s) based on an assessment of need and life course and resilience approaches. These may involve a continuation of existing supports and/or specialist leaving care services in areas such as education and employment, mental health, and stable housing" [2].

1.3 Characteristics of the activity of the Youth support centre and needs of the target group

The Youth Support Centre is a structural unit of the Children and Youth Centre, which carries out preventive and social work with young people in the transition period to adult status and independent living. The Children and Youth Centre of the Riga municipality is an institution that provides out-of-home care services for children in the institution (~130 children in residential care). In 2022, more than 781 young people receive the service of the Youth Support Centre.

The Youth Support Centre provides psycho-emotional, informational, and educational support to young people from all forms of out-of-home care¹ between the ages of 17 and 24, as well as their guardians, foster parents, with the aim of achieving an effective transition process for the young person to start an independent life. The first contact with the Youth Support Centre employee is made twelve months before the young person reaches the age of majority and continues to work until the age of twenty-four, providing an individual social rehabilitation.

Thirteen specialists work with young people at the Youth Support Centre, including three social workers, nine youth workers, and the centre's head. Each social worker oversees the work of three youth workers. The manager is responsible for supervising the

¹There are three forms of out-of-home care in Latvia - foster family, guardianship, childcare institution.

centre's operations, addressing problematic situations, establishing collaborations with other service providers, and informing young people about available services, among other responsibilities. Each young person is assigned a staff member as their contact person, who serves as a mentor. The frequency of visits to the Youth Support Centre is determined by the individual needs of the young person and their involvement in activities. At the beginning of their collaboration, a "Life Plan" is jointly developed with the young person, discussing achievable goals, specific tasks, and actions to accomplish them. If the young person visits the centre less frequently than once a month, an employee takes the initiative to reach out to them. Regular contact is maintained with all young people, including those who have left the country or live outside of Riga. All projects and activities at the Youth Support Centre are inclusive and apply to all young people equally, regardless of their health status, type of care, or other characteristics [12].

Considering that the target group is characterized by a lack of support and close relationships, the employees at the centre serve as the primary resource for young people in resolving various situations. The collaboration between Youth Support Centre employees and young people is focused on helping them develop the following skills and address the following issues: building relationships with important individuals in their lives, managing regular payments such as rent, utilities, and other services, creating and managing personal budgets, effective time planning, cooking skills, maintaining personal hygiene and a clean environment, assistance with education-related matters such as finding suitable educational institutions and supporting the learning process. They also deal with housing-related issues such as apartment searching, contract signing, and setting up, employment-related concerns including CV writing, composing motivation letters, job searching, and facilitating communication with employers if needed, navigating various institutions such as Social Services and family doctors through communication and visits, managing identity documents, resolving problem situations faced by the young person's friends or partners, providing psycho-emotional support and engaging in friendly conversations, as well as offering any other necessary support required by the young person.

Based on the observations of the Youth Support Centre staff, the primary needs of young people are to feel a sense of belonging, to be understood, accepted, and valued. They need a constant support person and the feeling that someone cares and worries about them. This contradicts the typical understanding of young people about their primary needs, as they believe that these are money/material needs, so that they will have the opportunity to live a "beautiful life", no daily hardships, no need to study and work. These contradictions particularly show the challenges that social workers and youth workers face when working with young people as a target group.

2 Materials and methods

Research objective was to find out the impact of Youth Support Centre approach and activities on changes in the social functioning (SF) of young people. A mixed research methodology is adopted, encompassing statistical data analysis to scrutinize the SF of the targeted youth cohort, in-depth interviews with social workers and Youth Support Centre administrators, a survey of the young participants, as well as life story interviews and focus group discussions to assess the specific needs of the target group.

To assess the impact of the activities of social workers and staff of the Youth Support Centre on the behavioural changes of young individuals, a comprehensive evaluation of the fluctuations in the dynamics of SF among the youth was conducted. Data for this study was sourced from the Youth Support Centre client's database, specifically selected for the period

from 01.01.2021 to 31.12.2021. A representative sample of 55 young participants was chosen, and their SF was assessed on three different occasions during the specified period.

The social functioning of the young participants was dissected into several distinct criteria, including housing, employment, education, income, addictions, health, social skills, and household skills. Each criterion was evaluated on a categorical scale of low, medium, and high SF, thereby representing qualitative data. To facilitate quantitative data processing, these categorical values were transformed into numerical points, with low SF being assigned 1 point, medium SF receiving 2 points, and high SF garnering 3 points.

3 Results

The analysis revealed several significant findings that shed light on the factors influencing social functioning among young people.

Impact of Assessment Environment:

Young people exhibited high levels of social functioning at the Youth Support Centre, indicating the positive impact of a change in the environment and support structures. This highlights the importance of creating supportive and empowering environments to enhance social functioning among young people.

Addressing Addictions and Life Skills:

The study identified addictions and life skills as significant factors influencing social functioning. Young people assessed at the Youth Support Centre showed high social functioning in these areas, underscoring the importance of targeted interventions that address addictions and provide essential life skills training for young people, contributing to improved social functioning outcomes.

Influence of Care Types:

The analysis revealed significant differences in social functioning outcomes based on different types of care. Youths in foster care and guardianship exhibited higher levels of social functioning compared to those in institutional care. This highlights the critical role of supportive and nurturing environments in foster care and guardianship settings, contributing to better social functioning outcomes for young people.

Impact of Mental Disorders:

The study found that young people with mental disorders experienced lower social functioning compared to their counterparts without such disorders. This emphasizes the need for tailored interventions and support systems that specifically address the unique challenges faced by young people with mental disorders. Comprehensive strategies are required to enhance their social functioning outcomes.

Factors Influencing Social Functioning:

Data analysis identified key factors influencing social functioning among young people. Addictions, particularly nicotine, drugs, and alcohol, along with education, accounted for a significant portion (53%) of the variance in social functioning. This highlights the importance of addressing addictions and promoting educational opportunities to enhance social functioning outcomes among young people.

The qualitative research showed that youth facing adversity, such as those growing up without parental care or transitioning from institutional care, often encounter significant challenges that hinder their personal development and social integration. In response to these issues, the Youth Support Centre approach provides comprehensive support services to vulnerable youth.

Material and Financial Support

One of the key findings of the study pertains to the Youth Support Centre's ability to provide guidance to vulnerable youth for material and financial support. Participants expressed difficulties in navigating the complexities of applying for benefits and paying

utility bills. The Youth Support Centre staff played a crucial role in assisting them with completing application forms, communicating with social welfare authorities, and managing their financial responsibilities. This support was particularly important for participants who lacked an informal support system and would have otherwise struggled to access the necessary resources.

Emotional and Social Support

The study revealed that Youth Support Centre served as an essential source of emotional and social support for vulnerable youth. Participants valued the opportunity to socialize with their peers in a safe and supportive environment. They emphasized the positive impact of having a place to go and individuals to talk to who understood their unique challenges. The emotional support provided by Youth Support Centre staff within the new approach was instrumental in building self-confidence, improving social skills, and fostering a sense of belonging among the participants.

Educational and Career Guidance

Several youngsters expressed a need for additional educational support within the Youth Support Centre. They highlighted the importance of access to tutoring services, particularly for subjects that posed challenges to them. The inclusion of educational support within the program was seen as instrumental in increasing their chances of successfully completing their studies. Furthermore, participants indicated a desire for career guidance and assistance with job-seeking skills, such as writing resumes and cover letters, as well as connecting with potential employers. These findings underscore the significance of comprehensive educational and career development components in supporting the long-term success of vulnerable youth.

In summary, the study presents a comprehensive exploration of factors influencing social functioning among young individuals. It underscores the significance of a supportive environment, addressing addictions and life skills, the impact of care types and mental disorders, and the multifaceted aspects of support provided by the Youth Support Centre. The findings emphasize the importance of tailored interventions, comprehensive support systems, and nurturing environments for enhancing social functioning outcomes and promoting the well-being of vulnerable youth as well as provide valuable insights into the factors that influence social functioning among young people. The results emphasize the significance of targeted interventions, supportive environments, and tailored care arrangements in promoting positive social functioning outcomes. This signifies that the novel approach, centred around prevention, cultivating a youth-friendly environment, providing individualized support and mentorship, organizing, and strategizing the transition phase, and carrying out periodic evaluations, yields evident positive outcomes. The Youth Support Centre approach has demonstrated its efficacy in providing comprehensive support to vulnerable youth in Riga. The Centre's focus on material, emotional, and social support has a positive impact on the lives of participants, enabling them to navigate the challenges they face and work towards a brighter future. However, there is a need for additional resources and extended working hours to maximize the effectiveness. Further research and evaluation are necessary to validate and expand upon these findings, paving the way for evidence-based interventions and comprehensive support systems for at-risk youth to foster their well-being and successful integration into society.

4 Conclusions

The assessment of young people's needs requires a delicate balance between focusing on their individual needs and considering society's expectations. It is crucial to provide a safe environment and the presence of a supportive person who can guide and assist them. The value placed by young people on the opportunity to socialize with their peers in a safe and

supportive environment is evident, highlighting the positive impact of having a place to go and individuals to confide in who understand their unique challenges. Building equal relationships based on persistence, patience, creativity, and honesty enhances the probability of successful engagement with young individuals.

Significantly, there has been a noteworthy shift in the approach of social work when working with young people, transitioning from maintaining a distance to actively sharing subjective experiences and engaging in activities together. However, it is important to recognize that the development of preventive work with young people often extends beyond the scope of traditional social services. As social work becomes more specialized, professionals dedicated to working with young people are essential in addressing their unique needs and challenges. By embracing these principles, social workers can make a meaningful and lasting impact on the lives of young individuals, supporting their development and well-being. Social service staff plays a particularly crucial role in assisting young people with completing application forms, communicating with social welfare authorities, and managing their financial responsibilities. As well as by addressing critical factors such as addictions, life skills development, and mental health support, professionals and policymakers can contribute to the overall well-being and future prospects of young people.

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