

TALLINN RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION PLAN ON ALTERNATIVE CARE AND FAMILY SUPPORT FOR THE BALTIC SEA REGION 2015 - 2020



Government representatives, experts and professionals from the Baltic Sea Region including Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, Sweden and wider Europe endorsed the Tallinn Recommendations and Action Plan on Alternative Care and Family Support for the Baltic Sea Region on the 6th of May 2015 in Tallinn.

The Recommendations and Action Plan were endorsed after a two-day meeting discussing the situation of alternative care and family support in the region. The experts highlighted the urgency of integrating services for children and families at risk, ensuring timely interventions and longer-term follow-up services for children at risk that are tailor-made for their individual needs and accessible at a low threshold. The experts underlined the crucial importance of implementing policies and good practices at the national/local level and increasing regional cooperation. Services for family support, child protection and alternative care constitute strategic investments in children's safety, well-being and development and these, in turn, are a condition for a safe and secure region as well as a sustainable and prosperous society.

The Estonian Presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs and the CBSS Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk (EGCC) hosted the expert level meeting. Alternative care has been a priority for the Expert Group since its inception in the late 1990s. The purpose of the 2015 expert meeting was to assess and discuss the present situation of institutional and family-based care, achievements and challenges in light of the previous regional commitments. In preparation for the meeting, an overview of family support and alternative care in the Baltic Sea Region was developed.



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS



Estonian Presidency
2014-2015

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE REGION:

The participants and speakers at the expert level meeting made the following recommendations, and:

Recognized the importance of strengthening the work of the Council of the Baltic Sea States Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk and the Children's Unit in the CBSS Secretariat, both of which lead and support the CBSS Member States in taking responsibility for children at risk in the Baltic Sea Region, and continuing to expand professional networks and expertise;

Encouraged the Member States of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk to follow-up on the Recommendations and Action Plan from the Expert Level Meeting and to prepare a meeting at Ministerial level to take stock of the progress achieved, express political commitment and support further action;

Recommended that the Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk continues to prioritise the prevention of family separation, ensure family support and raise the quality of alternative care **with existing and foreseen funding** by:

- Promoting the progressive transition from institutional to family-based and family-like care in line with the best interests of the child and quality standards of care;
- Disseminating the AudTrain tool for auditing and monitoring child care facilities;

- Promoting child-friendly justice and the Children's House or equivalent models of integrated services for children who are victims of violence;

- Fostering cooperation at the national and transnational levels to support access to appropriate and continuous support and preventive services for children and caregivers who move within and across national borders;

- Facilitating an effective implementation of laws for the prevention of violence against children - with a view to achieve a reduction and elimination of violence in practice.

Encouraged the Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk **to seek external funding** for the following priorities:

- Pilot, map and promote good and innovative practices for ensuring timely and tailor-made support for children and families, including in transnational contexts, and for high-quality care in all alternative care settings;

- Pilot, map and promote integrated services for children and families at risk and enhance low-threshold accessibility, including specifically during pregnancy and throughout early childhood;

- Compile and promote evidence-based and evaluated methods for preventive family support, parental support, child protection responses and alternative care.

RECOMMENDED ACTION FOR THE NATIONAL LEVEL:

Consolidate social welfare, family support, child protection and alternative care services into integrated models at the central, regional and local levels, involving service-oriented multi-stakeholder teams that have been trained to apply multi-disciplinary approaches;

Strengthen the capacity of service providers to prevent family separation and to promote family reunification through early identification and intervention, reducing risks for family breakdown by activating resiliencies and addressing the needs of children and caregivers within their socio-cultural context – with a view to achieving sustainable and long-term solutions.

Ensuring that the removal of a child and placement in alternative care is a measure of last resort clearly regulated by law with the relevant safeguards and in accordance with the best interests of the child;

Provide support to the parents of children placed in alternative care and actively enable family reunification whenever it is possible and in the best interests of the child;

Introduce legislation, procedures and practices to safeguard children's right to be heard and to participate in the care system in a child-sensitive and meaningful way, both as individuals and collectively, at all levels of decision-making and in all matters concerning them, including the right to complaint and to seek redress;

Foster approaches and attitudes in social service provision that respect children and caregivers as competent partners in co-determining the support needed, balancing potentially conflicting interests with due consideration to the best interests of the child, while maintaining professionalism in service provision and upholding universal rights and standards;

Invest in the social workforce as agents of change by raising the social status and appeal of the job combined with a reduction of caseload per social worker through innovative, preventive and multi-disciplinary approaches;

Strengthen the role of research, evaluation and consultation in developing evidence-informed methods and solution-oriented interventions in service provision;

Promote a zero tolerance environment for all forms of violence and abuse against children across the region;

Promote the legal obligation to report and prevent cases of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children in all forms, including corporal punishment, by strengthening child protection networks involving key professions and institutions, including baby clinics, midwives, paediatricians, forensic doctors, hospitals and the health sector generally, schools and the social service sector;

Engage relevant national and local level actors in developing a common understanding of what the transition from institutional to family-based and family-like care entails and how to define and use key child rights principles in practice;

Enable the continued and progressive transition from institutional care to family-based and family-like care, especially for children with special needs, and deliver professional support, training and supervision for caregivers, especially foster carers and care staff;

Ensure financing allocated to residential institutions is redirected to policies and services for family support and quality alternative care when institutions are being closed down as part of the transition process;

Enhance the quality of care for children in any care setting by ensuring types of placement and services that are tailor-made and appropriate to the individual needs of the child and service delivery in accordance with general principles, such as the best interests of the child, the right to non-discrimination, the right to be heard, holistic development, safety, equity, continuity and permanency in care, and preventing undue financial gain of any actor involved in alternative care;

Safeguard the rights of all children to the same standards of quality care irrespective of their socio-economic background, minority situation, immigration status, where they live in the country, and whether the private or public sector provides services;

Support children in alternative care to succeed in education with a view to investing in their development and future labour market inclusion;

Support children in alternative care in their transition into adulthood and independence by developing their skills during placement and through after care services;

Encourage monitoring, auditing and evaluation of all alternative care arrangements for children, including by independent institutions, ensuring children's views and recommendations are heard and duly taken into account, and utilising the outcomes for holding authorities, public and private service providers and care staff accountable;

Enable and encourage relevant authorities working with families and children at risk who move within or across national borders to provide continuity of care, prevent further harm and enable cost-efficient operations, including by enabling information exchange wherever appropriate;

Strengthen communication among the central, regional and local levels of the public administrations and encourage local authorities, service providers and other bodies to develop and evaluate innovative solutions in family support, child protection and alternative care with a view to promoting successful approaches and engaging in a national dialogue for continued development and quality.