

Childcare in Latvia: Moving from out-of-family care to family-based or family-like care

ESPN Flash Report 2019/46

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JULY 2019

In recent years (2015-2019), out-of-family childcare has become the focus of considerable attention - various initiatives have been implemented to stimulate the transfer of children from out-of-family care to family-based or family-like care. Problems still persist in inter-institutional cooperation: local governments and their institutions are not keen to implement the reforms, which creates obstacles for the further development of foster families and the successful transition of children from institutional care to a system based on a familial environment.

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Description

After its EU accession in 2004, Latvia retained, for more than a decade, a system which placed a large number of children deprived of parental care in institutions (orphanages). Since 2015, considerable reforms with appropriate budgetary funding have been implemented in the out-of-family care system in Latvia to improve the existing system, safeguarding the best interests of these children (for healthy children as well as children with disabilities), and to enable them to grow up in a “familial” environment. These reforms led to a significant decrease in the number of children in social care institutions: from 1429 in 2015 to 794 at the end of 2018, i.e. a reduction of more than 40%.

To further stimulate the development of an out-of-family care system based on a familial environment, state support for family-based or family-like care (i.e. foster families, guardians and adoptive parents) has to be improved. The state significantly increased financial support and social protection for family-based or family-like care in 2017-2018. Concurrently, efforts are being focused on developing community-based social services for family-based or family-like care. In the beginning of 2019, there were 16 regional support centres for out-of-family care service providers. Their task is to attract new host families, as well as to provide psychological and methodological support to foster families (including specialised families), guardians, host families and adoptive

parents, and to the children who are taken care of by these families.

To implement this reform, particular attention is paid to the development of foster families as a first stage of transition. In the middle of 2018, two types of specialised foster families were introduced in Latvia: “crisis” foster families and specialised foster families for disabled children in need of special care due to severe functional disorders. Even though specialised foster families play a significant role in preventing the placement of disabled children in institutions, no foster family has acquired this status until now.

Outlook and commentary

The policy measures taken are very important. However, the implementation of the reform requires a multidimensional approach. According to various non-governmental organisations (e.g. the Latvian SOS Children's Villages Association), the Ombudsperson and the State Audit Office, successful implementation of the reform is being hindered by serious problems. The State Audit Office audited the efficiency of the out-of-family care system and published its conclusions in a Report publicly available since March 2019. The obstacles to the development of foster families are being discussed actively by politicians, policy implementers and NGOs and are extensively reported in the mass media. The problems in the operation of foster families and the

establishment of specialised foster families are linked to poor cooperation between public agencies and local government institutions, as well as the shortage of expertise in the supervising and monitoring institutions, and their relative lack of concern to represent the best interests of the child.

Although the evaluation report by the State Audit Office indicates that the current number of foster families is insufficient, by the middle of 2019 there were around 90 foster families not hosting a child (in 2018 there was a total of 636 foster families in Latvia), while more than 700 children remained in institutions.

The delay in the establishment of specialised foster families is also having a negative impact on the implementation of the reform. The first specialised foster family training programme (a prerequisite for foster families to acquire specialisation and the status of specialised foster family) was approved only on 11 December 2018, half a year after the envisaged implementation.

After the publication of the State Audit Office evaluation report on the development of out-of-family care, the Minister for Welfare also became actively involved in the discussion. According to the Minister, one of the problems is the custody courts' lack of interest in finding a family to take in the child. At present the courts do not have the expertise required, and not everything is done to further the best interests of the child. The

Minister has expressed the view that childcare institutions are not interested in reducing the number of children staying with them, as their presence provides work places and income for the staff of the institutions. The Minister believes that local governments also wish to maintain orphanages, since the local authorities receive part of the income tax of the employees registered in their territory.

It is essential to increase the financial support to foster families, guardians and adoptive parents and to provide them with training and specialist support in their daily life. Likewise, it is of particular importance that local governments change their attitude and contribute to eliminating the obstacles that prevent the transfer of children from out-of-family care to family-based or family-like care. Finally, the monitoring of children's and family rights should be further improved. Childcare provided by guardians, foster families or by orphanages should be monitored, to ensure the protection of children's interests; this will require a better knowledge of these rights by custody courts.

Further reading

Ministry of Welfare (2015), "Konceptija par adopcijas un ārpusģimenes aprūpes sistēmu pilnveidošanu" ["The concept of improving adoption and out-of-family care"]: <http://polsis.mk.gov.lv/documents/5144>

Ombudsperson of the Republic of Latvia (2019), "I. Bērnu tiesību joma. Latvijas Republikas tiesībsarga 2018.gada ziņojums" ["I. Field of children's rights. Report of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia for 2018"]. Rīga, 2019.gads: http://www.tiesibsargs.lv/uploads/content/tiesibsarga_2018_gada_zinojums_1550749223.pdf

State Audit Office of the Republic of Latvia (2019), "Atņemtā bērnība. Ikvienam bērnam ir tiesības uzaugt ģimenē. Revīzijas ziņojums" ["The stolen childhood. Every child has the right to grow up in a family". Audit report]: http://www.lrvk.gov.lv/uploads/reviziju-zinojumi/2018/2.4.1-9_2018/Zi%C5%86ojums_At%C5%86emt%C4%81%20b%C4%93rn%C4%ABba.%20Ikvienam%20b%C4%93rn%C4%ABbas%20uzaukt%20%C4%A3imen%C4%93.pdf

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Quoting this report: Tana Lace (2019). Childcare in Latvia: Moving from out-of-family care to family-based or family-like care, ESPN Flash Report 2019/46, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.