



Peer Review on “Furthering quality and accessibility of Foster Care service”

Peer Country Comments Paper – The Netherlands

**Foster Care in Croatia and the Netherlands:
lessons to learn from each other**

Online, 20-21 May 2021

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Written by the Ministry of Health, Wellbeing and Sports, Pieter
Lammers

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Contact: Stefan ISZKOWSKI

E-mail: EMPL-SPSI-PEER-REVIEWS@ec.europa.eu

Web site: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1024>

European Commission

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Situation of foster care in the Netherlands	1
2.1	Becoming and being a foster parent in The Netherlands	1
2.2	Financial support for foster parents	2
3	Assessment of the policy measure.....	2
3.1	Main similarities	2
3.1.1	Professionalisation of foster care.....	2
3.1.2	Collaboration	3
3.1.3	Challenges	3
3.2	Main differences.....	3
3.2.1	Geographical difference	3
3.2.2	Categorisation	3
3.3	Success factors transferable from the Netherlands to Croatia.....	4
3.3.1	Reduce the outflow of foster parents	4
3.3.2	Involvement of stakeholders	4
3.3.3	Peer support for foster parents and foster children.....	4
3.4	Success factors from Croatia to the Netherlands	4
3.4.1	After-placement care.....	4
3.4.2	Collaboration with NGOs	5
4	Questions	5
5	List of references	5
	Annex 1 Summary table	6
	Annex 2 Example of relevant practice.....	7

1 Introduction

This paper has been prepared for Peer Review on "Furthering quality and accessibility of foster care service" in Croatia. It provides a comparative assessment of the policy example of the Host Country and the situation in The Netherlands. For information on the host country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Discussion Paper.

2 Situation of foster care in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has a long tradition of foster care. Since the 1950s, foster care has been professionalised, with the foundation of a national association for foster families and a Foster Children Law (Rijksoverheid, 1951), which regulated the placement of foster children and introduced supervision by the state. Throughout the years, the professionalisation of foster care was enhanced, with the introduction of financial support for foster parents, training programmes, and screening systems.

In 2015, with the passing of the Youth Law (Rijksoverheid, 2015), municipalities in the Netherlands became responsible for providing youth care and foster care to their citizens. Municipalities contract companies (i.e. care providers) to provide services related to foster care (e.g. recruit and train staff, recruit foster parents, handle contracts, etc.) and to deliver care services of sufficient quality. At the moment there are 28 care providers providing foster care in The Netherlands.

On a yearly basis, roughly 20,000-25,000 children receive foster care in about 16,000 foster families (Jeugdzorg Nederland, 2021). To put this number into perspective, there are roughly 3.5 million children 0-18 in The Netherlands:

Table 1. Total number of foster children and foster families in the Netherlands

Year	Foster children	Foster families
2019	23,272	16,717
2018	22,714	16,534
2017	23,206	16,655
2016	21,685	16,647

Source: (see factsheets) [Feiten en cijfers over pleegzorg](#) | [Pleegzorg.nl](#)

In the Netherlands, children can be placed in a foster family on a voluntary basis or as part of a custody measure. Besides, foster children can reside full-time or part-time at foster family (e.g. during the weekend, or several days per week).

2.1 Becoming and being a foster parent in The Netherlands

To become a foster parent in the Netherlands you have to be at least 21 years old and undergo a process of screening and preparation. Potential foster parents take the following steps to become a foster parent:

- 1) **Screening by the Child Protection Council.** The Child Protection Council screens potential foster parents and anyone above the age of 12 living at the same address as the potential foster parent(s) (such as children, partners, etc.). The Child Protection Council also checks potential criminal records.
- 2) **Visiting an information evening.** Potential foster parents visit an information evening session, organised by foster care providers. Potential foster parents are informed about foster care, the support of the foster care provider and (often) get informed by foster parents about their experiences.
- 3) **Following an introduction training.** Potential foster parents attend a training to learn more about being a foster parent, such as the background and

development of foster children and how to work together with the biological parents. This training usually lasts several days.

- 4) **Conversations with the foster care provider.** Potential foster parents will have several conversations with the foster care provider, so that foster care provider gets an overview of the situation and history of the potential foster parent(s). Based on the training and the conversations, the foster care provider determines if the potential foster parent is qualified to become a foster parent.
- 5) **Decision.** After successfully having gone through the steps described above potential foster parents decide if they want to become a foster parent or not.

Once accepted as a foster parent, foster parents receive support from the foster care provider in several ways. First, the foster care provider helps with day-to-day care and questions (e.g. practical questions, help in raising a child, help in working together with the biological parents, etc.). Second, foster parents can follow trainings to deal with specific challenges, such as trainings in how to deal with attachment issues, trauma, sexuality, puberty, etc. Last, foster parents receive financial support to raise their foster child(ren) (see more below).

2.2 Financial support for foster parents

Every foster parent receives financial support to deal with the financial consequences of raising a foster child. The financial support is composed of several components:

- **Standard fee:** which is the same for every foster parent and depends on the age of the foster child, ranging from EUR 585 per month (age 0-8) to EUR 720 per month (age 18+).
- **Extra fee:** some foster parents receive an extra fee. This is the case when a) there is a crisis placement; b) the foster parents raise three or more foster children; or c) the foster parents raise a foster child with a mental and/or physical disability.
- **Extraordinary costs:** foster parents can be compensated for extraordinary costs (such as incidental medical costs, a new bicycle, etc.). The foster care provider determines if these costs are necessary in raising the foster child.

3 Assessment of the policy measure

The Netherlands and Croatia show some similarities and differences in relation to the organisation of foster care.

3.1 Main similarities

3.1.1 Professionalisation of foster care

The main similarity between both countries is the professionalisation of foster care. Both countries have undergone a process to strengthen the professionalisation of foster care and have extended the services provided (financial support, training, emotional support, etc.) to foster families. Both countries have increased training possibilities and screening processes (see par. 2.1) to ensure a high level of quality for foster children.

Besides, in both countries, the main driving force for this increased professionalisation was the deinstitutionalisation of youth care. In the Netherlands and Croatia, there has been a growing concern over the institutionalisation of youth care. In both countries, the dominating view is that children should grow up in families as much as possible. In Croatia, this process was formalised in the Foster Care Act of 2018, while in the Netherlands, the Youth Law of 2015 (Rijksoverheid, 2015) states that municipalities should strive to provide care as close to home as possible (e.g. care at home, foster

care, etc.). The main principle underlying these policies is the same in both countries: it is better for children to grow up in a family, preferably close to home.

3.1.2 Collaboration

Furthermore, in both countries, the provision of foster care is carried out by a collaboration between several parties. In Croatia, foster care consists of a close collaboration between social welfare centres, children's care homes, community service centres, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), religious organisations and private organisations. In the Netherlands, foster care is carried out by care providers and municipalities in collaboration with the child protection service, custody services and judges. Policies are designed through collaboration of the national government, municipalities, the child protection service, a national youth research institute, and organisations for foster families and foster children. Both countries get input from different angles to improve policies and further professionalise foster care.

3.1.3 Challenges

The challenges faced by foster care in both countries are similar, in particular when it comes to the difficulties in the matching process and the availability of foster families. Both countries face challenges in finding the right foster family for a child in need and have difficulties recruiting and maintaining foster families. It seems that in both countries, it is difficult to find enough families willing and able to take care of foster children. Moreover, both countries have used national media campaigns to tackle this problem.

Policies in the Netherlands have tried to focus on increasing the inflow of new foster parents and decreasing the outflow. Despite media campaigns, we have seen relative stability in the Netherlands in the number of foster families, with the inflow of new foster families being only slightly bigger than the outflow. Part of the outflow is 'natural' (e.g. foster parents who decide to quit because of their age or kinship foster parents who quit when their foster child leaves the family). However, in the Netherlands, we also see foster parents leaving foster care for other reasons, such as a lack of support or difficulties between the foster parents and the foster children (NJI, 2020). Policies are targeted at both increasing the inflow of foster parents and decreasing the outflow (see 3.3.1 for further details).

3.2 Main differences

There are some differences as well between both Croatia and the Netherlands.

3.2.1 Geographical difference

First of all, there is a geographical difference. While in Croatia an important challenge is to find foster families in less populated rural areas, in the Netherlands, this problem is less prominent (although also existing), as the country is much more densely populated. On the other hand, the population density in the Netherlands means that there is a need for foster care throughout the country and a stable number of foster families is needed in the whole country.

3.2.2 Categorisation

The categorisation of different types of foster care is different in Croatia and in the Netherlands. Specialised foster care does not exist in the Netherlands. Instead, there are 'family homes', where professional caretakers live with a group of children. Unlike foster parents, these professionals are fully qualified and registered care providers and receive a salary. This form of care is organised in a slightly larger setting than foster care (approximately four to six children per family home). Kinship foster care is also carried out slightly differently in the two countries. In the Netherlands, kinship foster parents need to fulfil training requirements, just like standard foster parents.

3.3 Success factors transferable from the Netherlands to Croatia

There are several success factors that can be transferred from the Netherlands to Croatia. These include measures to reduce the outflow of foster parents, the practice of involving stakeholders, and the peer support for foster parents and foster children. On the other hand, success factors that could be transferred from Croatia to the Netherlands include after-placement care.

3.3.1 Reduce the outflow of foster parents

In the Netherlands, a research was conducted to explore why foster parents decide to leave (Nji, 2020). Additionally, several actors have worked on an action research to determine which factors are successful in reducing breakdown and the outflow of foster parents (Nji, 2021). Based on these research findings (the results will be published soon), actors like foster care providers will work on policies to reduce the outflow of foster parents, such as involving a 'buddy' or 'senior foster parent' in the process of raising a foster child, interventions such as systems therapy or regular evaluations and monitoring of the situation in foster families.

Moreover, focusing on the reasons for the outflow of foster parents can give insight into the challenges that foster parents face. For instance, in the Netherlands, foster parents indicated that they sometimes struggle with the (lack of) support they receive and that they need support after the foster child leaves their care.

3.3.2 Involvement of stakeholders

Another transferable success factor is working closely together with foster children, foster parents, foster children associations, and foster family associations while designing and implementing policies. In the Netherlands, foster children, foster parents and their associations have been very active in policymaking on the level of care providers (helping in improving day-to-day support), municipalities and the national government. We believe that foster children and foster parents are in the best position to explain their wishes and how policies could improve their situation. We try to incorporate the voice of foster children and foster parents in the legislation (foster children and foster parents have certain rights) and in the practice of policy designing. Every foster care provider is legally obliged to have a foster parent council and some care providers have decided to start a foster children council as well. Besides, foster parent and foster children associations are included in policymaking on the national level, together with other stakeholders such as municipalities and foster care providers. Moreover, the national government supports foster children associations to increase their influence on the local level (i.e. municipalities and foster care providers).

3.3.3 Peer support for foster parents and foster children

A last success factor from the Netherlands is to establish peer support for foster parents and foster children. We see that foster parents often face common challenges, which can be especially hard for new foster parents and foster children. By providing peer support, foster parents can help each other, advise each other, and share their experiences to help each other. Foster families, care providers and municipalities in the Netherlands have worked on centralising information and providing a platform for foster parents to share their experiences. Foster children have also organised themselves in an association to get in touch with each other, share experiences and help each other when needed. Peer support can be a positive addition to the professional support provided to foster children and foster parents.

3.4 Success factors from Croatia to the Netherlands

3.4.1 After-placement care

There are several success factors in Croatia that could be implemented in the Netherlands as well. First, it seems that Croatia put a strong emphasis on supporting

care leavers and collecting data after foster children leave care. As outlined above, also in the Netherlands, foster parents have indicated that they have a need for after-placement care. To ease the transition to adulthood for foster children, the age up to which children can receive foster care has been increased from 18 to 21 years old. Besides, care providers prepare foster children for the transition to adulthood. However, a stronger emphasis on care after placement and data collection can give us better insights into the lives of foster children after they leave care.

3.4.2 Collaboration with NGOs

Another transferable success factor is the close collaboration with NGOs in Croatia. Croatia manages to work in close collaboration with NGOs and has therefore managed to broaden the scope of policy interventions, for instance, to improve the situation for children with disabilities, children from ethnic minorities, children with behavioural problems, etc. A broad focus and close collaboration with NGOs can strengthen family life both within and outside foster care and is, therefore, a positive addition to the system of foster care. As outlined above, in the Netherlands, policies regarding foster care are the result of a close collaboration between the national government, municipalities, foster family associations, care providers, research agencies and government branches like the child protection service. However, NGOs often add specific knowledge and can give new insights that can be beneficial to the system of foster care.

4 Questions

- How and how long do you gather data from care leavers? Do you have extensive data on their whereabouts, the additional care they receive, their life outcomes (education, job, etc.)?
- What does the support after leaving care consist of? Is this support specifically for foster children or also for foster parents? And do all foster children receive this? Or only those in need and/or who are willing?
- Does Croatia have a favour/priority for kinship foster care above other types of foster care? (like we have in the Netherlands)
- In which types of situations do you receive foster care in Croatia?

5 List of references

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Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country

- There are roughly 23,000 foster children in the Netherlands and around 16,000 foster families.
- Municipalities are responsible for managing providing foster care services.
- Several forms of foster care are used in the Netherlands (kinship, full-time, part-time, etc.).

Assessment of the policy measure

- Both countries have focused on professionalisation of foster care and deinstitutionalisation of care.
- There is a shortage of foster parents in Croatia and the Netherlands, resulting in a difficult matching process.
- The population density in the Netherlands results in different challenges than Croatia faces.

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- Focusing on limiting the outflow of foster parents has been successful in the Netherlands.
- Policies in the Netherlands have benefitted from the inclusion of foster parents and foster children in the policymaking process.
- Croatia has booked success with a strong focusing on leaving care.
- A close collaboration with NGOs in Croatia has resulted in a broad view on foster care and related areas.

Questions

- How and how long do you gather data from care leavers? Do you have extensive data on their whereabouts, the additional care they receive, their life outcomes (education, job, etc.)?
- What does the support after leaving care consist of? Is this support specifically for foster children or also for foster parents? And do all foster children receive this? Or only those in need and/or who are willing?
- Does Croatia have a favor/priority for kinship foster care above other types of foster care? (like we have in the Netherlands)
- In which types of situations do you receive foster care in Croatia?

Annex 2 Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	Action research on breakdown and outflow of foster parents
Year of implementation:	2020/2021
Coordinating authority:	Care providers
Objectives:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Get insight on the reasons for breakdown and the outflow of foster parents.- Find methods that prevent breakdown and the outflow of foster parents
Main activities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Active research: care providers implemented measures against breakdown and outflow of foster parents.- Care providers monitored the effect of these measures.
Results so far:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Results will be published soon (see: https://www.continuiteitpleegzorg.nl/actieonderzoek/cover/)

