



Executive Summary

Peer review on “Furthering quality and accessibility of Foster Care Service in Croatia”

Online, 20-21 May 2021

The Peer review on ‘Furthering quality and accessibility of Foster Care Service in Croatia’ took place online on the 20 and 21 May 2021. The purpose of this event was to discuss challenges and good practices in providing foster care services to children without adequate parental care. In particular, the event focused on standards for foster families, professional care schemes and stepped further to exchange experiences on measures to prepare and support foster carers of children with severe disabilities and children with challenging behaviour.

The meeting was hosted by the Croatian Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy and brought together government representatives from Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Spain, European Commission officials, European and local Non-governmental Organisations representatives, national experts as well as a thematic expert.

In the opening remarks, Mr Jiří Švarc, Head of Unit Social Investment Strategy, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission, emphasised that foster care was a viable alternative for institutional care and that the Commission was strongly engaged in addressing the transition from institutional to community-based care. The policy framework in this area is defined by the recently published European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan¹, the Council recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee (to be adopted in June 2021) and, most importantly, by the Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030² that sets actions for the transition from institutional to community-based care. The Commission is well aware that the picture of foster care across Europe is complex and diverse in terms of organisation and services provided.

Ms Marija Barilić, Director of the Directorate for Family and Social Policy of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Croatia explained the importance of foster care in Croatia for protecting the rights of the children, including the right to family life; promoting equality; fighting against discrimination and maintaining social connections with the society. Also, Ms Barilić emphasised that in 2019, the professional foster carers’ model was introduced by the Foster Care Act to increase the quality of foster care, particularly for children with special needs. In 2020, Croatia counted 115 professional carers but none provided foster care to children with special needs.

The key policy messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows:

Increasing the transition from institutional to community-based services

- Deinstitutionalisation of the child alternative care systems towards foster care requires a multi-level integrated approach addressing various policy areas. This

¹ European Commission, 2021. *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en (26.05.2021)

² Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_810

process requires long-term commitment by all the stakeholders involved, and an ongoing support for participants.

- A successful strategy towards deinstitutionalisation must focus on establishing community-based services that can provide adequate individual support and implementing services that maintain an inclusive life in a community environment.
- Ensuring a proper match between each child and a perspective foster family is necessary to ensure the right of every child to enjoy a standard of living that is adequate for their physical, mental and social development, and to be able to grow up in a positive family environment.

Designing successful policies and measures

- Setting clear regulations and standards for foster care is important to establish well-defined framework for foster care services as well as foster partners and children. However, the approach should be flexible and take into consideration the diverse needs of foster families. For instance, in Italy the national guidelines on foster care are implemented at the regional and local levels in accordance with the case at hand.
- Foster parents and foster children need to be involved from the start. By sharing their first-hand experience, they can contribute to designing more efficient services and building trust and cooperation across foster care stakeholders.
- Reinforcing child-centred interventions is central to promoting a child's sense of identity and providing protection for children in foster families.
- When designing a policy, the existing services such as healthcare or education should be taken into consideration as they offer relevant support to the child in care. The support services have to be offered at the community level and be relevant to the particular needs of each child.
- Foster care policies and measures should be designed with the end goal of having the child reunited with the biological family. Therefore, it is important that that the child can maintain positive contact with its biological parents, also through the support of foster services and foster parents.
- Developing successful foster care policies and measures takes time. Therefore, sufficient and reliable funding is key.

Supporting foster parents requires continuous adequate and diverse support

- Foster parents need to know how to deal with various needs and crisis situations of the child (trauma, mental breakdown, contact with the legal system). This can be best achieved by developing specialised training material and offering individual support.
- Good and effective support services provide information and guidance to all foster parents, and do it in a user friendly and accessible format.
- Formal and informal networks of foster families are important. For example, meetings between foster families and with specialised personnel can help foster families to exchange knowledge, learn from each other and find solutions to common challenges.
- Special effort should be made to provide efficient and adequate support to foster families living in rural/remote areas. For example, Latvia has set up mobile support units that visit foster families living in rural areas.
- Member States need to further explore the possibility of providing full social insurance coverage (such as paid leave, unemployment, old age pension, etc.)

to all types of foster parents. This measure can also act as an incentive for attracting new potential foster parents.

- Strengthening support and devoting sufficient resources covering all needs of foster children can create a more positive experience for the foster families, thus increasing their willingness to foster more children.

Offering particular support and intensive care to foster children with disabilities and chronic health problems or with special needs

- Sufficient resources are essential to provide services that can effectively respond to the needs of foster children with disabilities, chronic health problems or with special needs. This should include not only adequate and efficient funding, but also training personnel in foster care services.
- The needs of foster children with disabilities, chronic health problems or with special needs are diverse and complex. Therefore, support measures and care shall start with a needs assessment, in cooperation with a specialized social worker. Care and support measures have to be continuous, comprehensive and adjusted to the child's needs and promote social inclusion.

Effective evaluation of foster care services requires independent screening and standard tools

- Recognising the complexity of foster care delivery can be helpful to ensure adequate knowledge about the outcome of the measures, programmes and policies implementation, in view of improving their performance. A continuous monitoring and screening of foster care policy are necessary, as foster care must be understood as an ongoing process.
- The evidence and data collected through monitoring and screening should be used when designing future policies in order to increase the relevance and efficiency of foster care.
- Adequate material and human resources are necessary to improve the processes of providing a licence to foster carers, as well as those of screening and monitoring. In this aspect technological means should be further used to increase efficiency and lower the administrative burden.
- Monitoring and screening should be based upon independent and nationally accepted standards and benchmarks to increase the efficiency and objectivity of the data collected.