

Local Network that Supports Young People Leaving Alternative Care

The experience of the project SUPPORTS



SUPPORTS

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1. Introduction

SUPPORTS - A project supporting young people leaving alternative care and preparing the transition into adulthood - was co-financed by the European Commission (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers), through the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme. As a transnational initiative, the project involved, besides CESIS - Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social -, the Bulgarian Pulse Foundation and the Italian Defence for Children International. The project was developed from 2018 until 2021.

The objectives of the project were: i) the empowerment of practitioners in implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Alternative Care Homes; ii) the participation of young people in everyday life of their homes and in the process of decision-making that concern them; iii) the creation of structures to follow-up young people after leaving alternative care, especially in this stage of transitioning into adulthood.

This document focuses on the experience that took place in Portugal and that resulted in a local network of institutions to follow-up young people after leaving alternative care. This document's intention is to create conditions to adapt this experience into other local contexts.



2. Brief reference to the context of implementation of the project SUPPORTS

In Portugal, this project was developed in Matosinhos.

In this council, there are four alternative care homes for children and young people and this project involved three institutions where the children and young people's age was on average correspondent to the project's orientation - young people transitioning into adulthood and leaving alternative care into independent living.

The entities involved accommodated, in the beginning of the project, 82 children/young people (39 girls and 43 boys) and 38% were over 18. Another feature of these children/young people is the strong presence of intellectual disabilities, which complicates leaving alternative care into independent living when lacking professional support.

The reasons behind the placement of these children/young people into alternative care are in line with the reasons identified at a national level: negligence; the child/young person undertaking behaviours that affect his/her wellbeing and the inexistence of parents or a guardian who may remove him/her from said behaviours; exposure to violence. Regardless of the appointed reason, violence (and its many types) is a common phenomena in the past of these children and young people with consequences in their present and their future.



3. Foundation

In Portugal, there is a high number of children living in alternative care,¹ as been reinforced internationally. In 2019, the report CASA [Annual Characterization of the Situation of Alternative Care for Children and Young People]² reports the existence of 9,522 children and young people in alternative care where 7,046 remained in alternative care and 2,476 terminated this measure of promotion and protection that year.

Regarding these 7,046 children, it is important to highlight the following:

- Only 191 were in foster family care;
- 2,346 children and young people (33,3%) had previous experience of alternative care; 535 children had been in alternative care three or more times in their lives;
- 5,672 children and young people were placed near their families, but 1,374 (19,5%) were relocated;
- 2,296 children and young people (32,6%) lived in alternative care for more than four years;
- The number of children and young people living in Residential Homes was 104 (in 2018, were an estimated 97);
- 15% of children and young people in alternative care showed mental disability or impairment;
- 1,971 children/young people (28%) were considered to have behavioural problems;
- 4,244 children and young people (60%) had had a protective measure in a natural environment before entering into alternative care.

On the other hand, of the 2,476 children and young people who left alternative care in 2019, 213 (8,6%) left once they were 18 without giving information about their destination and 227 became independent.

These characteristics enhance a few weaknesses of the system of promotion and protection and pinpoints the existence of increased challenges to these boys and girls in transitioning into an independent adulthood that guarantees social and professional integration.

In the context of the project SUPPORTS, the young people of the Advisory Board of Young People³ presented the hardships they felt once they left alternative care, especially in the access to the job market and housing. Being alone and feeling that they have unique life experiences - they meant maturity for some, and lack of knowledge of the “outside world” and less ability for a relationship with the institutions for others - turned fear into a constant feeling.

1 In the Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic report of Portugal, the Committee on the Rights of the Child states the following: 41.a) “The low number of foster families and family-based placements of children, and the still widespread use of institutionalization, in particular of younger children”. Available at: http://gddc.ministeriopublico.pt/sites/default/files/cdc_recomendacoes_a_portugal.pdf.

2 Department of Social Development / ISS (2020), CASA 2019 - *Relatório de Caracterização Anual da Situação de Acolhimento das Crianças e Jovens* [Annual Characterization of the Situation of Alternative Care for Children and Young People], ISS. Available at: <http://www.seg-social.pt/documents/10152/17405298/Relatório%20CASA%202019/0bf7ca2b-d8a9-44d2-bff7-df1f11dc7ee>.

3 The Advisory Board of Young People is part of the project SUPPORTS that gathered young people who have left alternative care and those who are about to leave. The group reflected on the alternative care, identified needs and contributed to the creation of the Local Network that Supports Young People Leaving Care.

With the testimonials, it was understood that often there was no preparation to leave care, which led to “life outside” being viewed as a threat. Not being able to identify the sounds of an empty house; not feeling able to manage the finances; not knowing the public transportation network or being afraid of having a job that implies more commuting; not knowing how to find housing; being completely alone with no family and no guidance; being afraid of accepting proposals that turn out to be illegal - these were a few anxieties expressed by the group.

On the other hand, if the difficulties in finding a job or a house are common to most part of the young people, it is important to acknowledge that, for those who just left alternative care and have no familiar support, these difficulties assume even greater importance and may have negative impacts.

Studies have showed that the existence of violence in the lives of children have several consequences in their development (at a physical, emotional, cognitive or behavioural level). Research also shows that when leaving alternative care, not all young people (especially those who lacked a therapeutic intervention, in the alternative care home, accordingly to the technical diagnosis and the needs identified) were able to overcome their past and still blame themselves for the separation that took place. It is also proven that after leaving alternative care, there is a higher probability of young people coming into conflict with the law; of becoming homeless; of reproducing the reasons that led them to alternative care with their descendants; of living in poverty.⁴

Taking this into consideration, a good preparation to leave alternative care and the existence of support (individual or as a group) are essential to overcome these integration needs in a faster and effective manner, especially in areas like employment, housing and health.⁵

As stated in the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (hereafter referred to as the UN Guidelines),⁶ the preparation to leave alternative care should be a constant concern as early as possible in the placement. It is stated that, “throughout the period of care, they should systematically aim at preparing children to assume self-reliance and to integrate fully in the community, notably through the acquisition of social and life skills, which are fostered by participation in the life of the local community”. It is also stated that, “both the public and the private sectors should be encouraged, including through incentives, to employ children from different care services”, including the implementation of vocational training and development of social skills; the access to social, legal and health services should be provided.

This transition process from a life in alternative care into independent living should take into consideration: sex, age and the young person’s maturity; existence of disabilities and health issues. Young people with special needs should benefit from an appropriate support system in order to avoid their (re)institutionalisation.

4 See, among others: Pinheiro, Paulo Sérgio, *World Report on Violence Against Children*, United Nations Publishing Services, Geneva. Available at: https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/document_files/world_report_on_violence_against_children.pdf.

5 See, among others: Moslehuddin, Badal e Mendes, Philip (2006) “*From Dependence to Interdependence: Toward better outcomes for young people leaving state care*” in *Child Abuse Review* (UK), Volume 15, pp.110-126.

6 Resolution adopted by General Assembly of UN 64/142 *Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children*. Available at: <http://www.cpcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/UN-Guidelines-for-Alternative-Care..pdf>.

4. Local Network Supporting Young People Leaving Alternative Care - the experience of the project SUPPORTS in Portugal

In line with what was mentioned above, creating a local network of institutions that ease the transition of young people in alternative care into independent living was the initial objective of the project SUPPORTS.

From the project's point of view, creating a local network supporting young people is unrelated to the work that every Alternative Care Home should continue to, as stated above, undertake to prepare the young person to leave alternative care as soon as early as possible in the placement. In fact, such a network should enhance that same work and its intentionality. Despite this, and for the reasons identified above, the existence of a follow-up support, with a time limit only defined by the will and the need of the young person, is mandatory - "Every young person needs continuous support in order to calmly transition into adulthood. Any good father, or any good mother, continues to offer love and support to his children after they turn 18, giving them the best possible opportunities to begin their life. Wanting less for young people in alternative care is wrong" (Mendes, 2009).

In line with how it was produced in the project, this support is defined by its inter-institutional character.

In the same way that the African proverb states that "it takes a village to raise a child", it is not possible for one institution alone to provide the support in every area and meeting all the needs that children/young people require after leaving alternative care. A holistic perspective on the rights of the child; a perspective embedded in the development needs of children and young people involve different entities and services working together.

This perspective is in accordance with the new enforcement regime of alternative care (Decree-Law 164/2019 of October 25)⁷ that states, in article 4i), that one of the guiding principles "should be to ensure the articulation between the entities involved, in the framework of a systemic approach that, through the practitioners, allows and facilitates the stimulus and the development of the child's or young person's potential and of his/her family".

In Matosinhos, while experimenting the project, this network supporting young people was intertwined with the Social Network and its Executive Committee and intends, thus, to be part of its wider structure and objectives.

The methodology - regarding the set-up and operation of the Local Network Supporting Young People Leaving Alternative Care (hereafter RLAJ) - that follows is a result of the discussion between practitioners of the three alternative care homes partaking in the project and of the collection of testimonials of young people from the Advisory Board based on their experiences.

⁷ Available at: <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/125692191>.

Objectives of the Local Network Supporting Young People Leaving Alternative Care

- Promote the improvement of social integration of young people leaving alternative care homes in Matosinhos;
- Prevent the (re)institutionalisation of young people; and
- Prevent the (re)victimisation.

Composition of the Local Network Supporting Young People

- City Council of Matosinhos
- MatosinhosHabit [Local authority for housing issues]
- Employment office of Matosinhos
- Oporto's District Centre of the Social Security Institute, IP
- Local Health Unit
- Lar da Nossa Senhora da Conceição
- Obra do Padre Grilo
- Lar da Santa Cruz
- Portuguese Institute for Drugs and Addiction
- Minors and Family Court
- Portuguese Red Cross
- Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People

Network Coordination and Committee

Coordination – City Council of Matosinhos

Executive Committee:

- City Council of Matosinhos (including the services of the Youth Centre of Matosinhos)
- MatosinhosHabit
- Employment office of Matosinhos
- Local Health Unit
- Oporto's District Centre of the Social Security Institute, IP
- Alternative care homes for children and young people in the council of Matosinhos

Guiding Principles of the Local Network Supporting Young People Leaving Care

Even though the RLAJ's aim is to support young people, many of whom are over 18, its guiding principles are based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), on the Law for the Protection of Children and Young People and, obviously, on the the national legislation.

- **Non discrimination.** In line with Article 2 of the UNCRC, and respecting the national legislation, the RLAJ will operate respecting the principle of non discrimination, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion and, when necessary, should implement the measures that protect children and young people from possible forms of discrimination.
- **Best interest of the young person.**
- **Respect for privacy,** right to an identity and respect for private life (Article 8 of the UNDCD and Article 4 b) of the Law for the Protection of Children and Young People; General Data Protection Regulation).
- **Participation,** regarding the right to be heard and to express his/her point of view in manners that concern him/her.

Targets of the Local Network Supporting Young People Leaving Alternative Care

The RLAJ intends to follow-up and support young people leaving alternative care in Matosinhos and initiating independent living.

Objectives of the RLAJ and its Executive Committee

Considering its objectives, the RLAJ composed by the institutions previously mentioned proposes to:

- Make available the access of young people to the existing resources in the respective institutions.
- Give new social answers to the needs identified.
- Evaluate the support/follow-up work implemented with the young people who have left alternative care.
- Identify strategies of disclosure to the young people in institutions and in the community, in general.

The Executive Committee of the RLAJ aims at:

- Designate a case manager to every young person that leaves alternative care homes, after the informed consent of the young person;
- Establish a life project to every young person;
- Provide psychological support to every young person when deemed necessary and according to the will of the young persons;
- Guarantee a contact with each young person every four month, at least;
- Coordinate with the other entities in order to facilitate the access to the necessary resources to the social integration of the young people.

The Network's Operation

i) Preparation

This phase included the following:

- Discussion of the RLAJ, its aims and ways of functioning
- Designation of the institution responsible for coordinating
- Designation of those responsible for representing each organisation in the RLAJ
- Designation of each participant's role
- Training for those who are going to make part of the RLAJ (this training was carried out in the framework of the project SUPPORTS).

ii) Functioning of the RLAJ



5. Practical comments derived from the experience of the project SUPPORTS in Portugal

The development of the project SUPPORTS was affected by the serious public health crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, none of the on-site sessions planned with young people took place and they were carried out on-line.

Despite these specific conditions of implementation, it was possible to identify a few issues that should be considered:

- Before any interaction between the young people and the RLAJ, the Alternative Care Homes should properly inform the young people about its existence, composition and operation. The practitioner responsible for the young person to be accompanied should ask for his/her permission to share relevant information about his/her life project with the RLAJ.
- The RLAJ's meetings in the alternative care homes are crucial - they help these organisations to be more open to the community; they contribute to an easier relationship between each practitioner of the RLAJ and the young person and between practitioners of different entities. They also promote an understanding about the RLAJ to every child/young person that resides in alternative care.
- If the young person is informed about the objectives of the RLAJ, in the first meeting between him/her and the RLAJ, the absence from said meeting of the responsible practitioner of the alternative care home could be positive.
- Every member of the RLAJ should be aware of what a respective approach means and also of the need to establish a relationship of trust and empathy.
- The accompaniment of each young person should be taken seriously and no expectations should be neglected. Each and every possibility of being able to respond to the needs and/or expectations of the young person should be clarified at an initial phase.
- Initially, the project decided to accompany young people who would be leaving alternative care in the next six months. Considering the housing situation, it was settled that it would be important to accompany those who would be leaving alternative care in the next 12 months.
- The RALJ will focus specially in the young people that intend to stay in the council. However, it was proposed to create an institutional articulation for those leaving Matosinhos.
- The RLAJ will create a Registration and Information System for each young person that will be shared among all its elements. This measure should take into account all the requirements contained in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

While developing the project SUPPORTS, the Local Network Supporting Young People Leaving Care in Matosinhos met and started accompanying six young people - four girls and two boys. One of them is already employed and considering that four young people are attending university, other measures of employment support - adapted to each profile and education - may be triggered; answers regarding the psychological support became available; housing measures are being pondered; specific programmes of financial literacy were created.



Information material of Project SUPPORTS

Materials addressed to children and young people

VIDEOS

Momento de entrada no Acolhimento Residencial

PT <https://youtu.be/BdKyc9WZZBk>

Entry into the residential care system

EN <https://youtu.be/IUsvemNlIP4>

Projeto de vida

PT https://youtu.be/aiDc71Yjc_w

About the life project

EN <https://youtu.be/d8VnYJoPkSM>

Preparar a saída

PT <https://youtu.be/zgP5C4GacIM>

Preparing for leaving

EN <https://youtu.be/k1PHpszluko>

PODCASTS

Momento de entrada no Acolhimento Residencial

PT <https://youtu.be/bdAr8wkiB4Y>

Entry into the residential care system

EN <https://youtu.be/2tQ7EBOBBAY>

Projeto de vida

PT <https://youtu.be/UEVyvll1RAg>

About the life project

EN <https://youtu.be/WHaeqSS6ZZY>

Preparar a saída

PT https://youtu.be/6F_S-0jLSJI

Preparing for leaving

EN <https://youtu.be/2sfJly0FC2c>

FLYERS

Momento de entrada no Acolhimento Residencial

PT https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Leaflet_acolhimento%20residencial.pdf

Entry into the residential care system

EN https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Leaflet_Entry%20residencial%20care.pdf

Projeto de vida

PT https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Leaflet_Projeto%20Vida.pdf

About the life project

EN https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Leaflet_About%20the%20life%20project.pdf

Preparar a saída

PT https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Leaflet_Momento%20Saida.pdf

Preparing for leaving

EN https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Leaflet_Preparing%20for%20leaving.pdf

Rede Local de Apoio a Jovens à saída do Acolhimento

PT https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Leaflet_Rede%20Local.pdf

Manifesto do Conselho Consultivo Jovem

PT https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Manifesto.pdf

Manifesto of the Advisory Board of Young People

EN https://www.cesis.org/admin/modulo_projects/upload/files/SUPPORTS-Manifesto-EN.pdf

Todos/as jovens têm direito a ser quem são. Todos/as jovens têm direito `não discriminação

PT https://youtu.be/zhnt-Q_n7M8

All young people have the right to be who they are. All young people have the right to non-discrimination

EN <https://youtu.be/NCVgdhAevXY>

Materials addressed to professionals

A relevância da participação na promoção dos direitos das crianças em acolhimento residencial
- Orientações para profissionais

PT https://cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-Guia_Profissionais.pdf

The importance of participation in the promotion of Children's Rights in alternative care facilities
- Lesson learned and orientation from the SUPPORTS' experience

EN https://www.cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-Lesson_learned_orientation_EN.pdf

A participação de crianças e jovens em acolhimento residencial - Exemplos práticos do projeto SUPPORTS

PT https://cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-Experiencias_de_participacao.pdf

The participation of children and young people in alternative care - Practical examples of the project SUPPORTS

EN https://www.cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-Practical_examples_EN.pdf

Apoio após a saída do acolhimento - A experiência do projeto SUPPORTS com a Rede Local de Acompanhamento a Jovens à Saída do Acolhimento em Matosinhos

PT https://cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-Rede_local.pdf

Local Network that Supports Young People Leaving Alternative Care The experience of the project SUPPORTS in Portugal

EN https://www.cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-local_network_EN.pdf

Projeto de Vida como instrumento de concretização da Convenção sobre os Direitos da Criança
- Orientações para profissionais

PT https://www.cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-formulario-projeto_vida-orientacoes.pdf

Life Project as a tool to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - Guidelines for practitioners from the perspective of SUPPORTS project experience

EN https://www.cesis.org/site/upload/documentos/SUPPORTS-form_life_project_guidelines_EN.pdf

Technical Sheet

Title: Local Network that Supports Young People Leaving Alternative Care
The experience of the project SUPPORTS

Entity: CESIS - Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social

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Date: April de 2021



SUPPORTS SUPPORTS - Supporting children in the delicate phase between adolescence and adulthood while leaving alternative care facilities.

SUPPORTS is a transnational project involving a partnership of 3 countries from the European Union - Bulgaria, Portugal and Italy - which join forces in order to develop comprehensive care for children leaving residential institutions. The main goal of the project is to create skills in teams of professionals working in the protection system and the CRC for holistic approach to child as a preliminary step towards the development and implementation of sustainable follow-up plans. The project focusses to promote the participation of children hosted in residential care facilities regarding decisions about their actual and future conditions.



Co-funded by the European Union.

This document was produced with financial support of the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme.

