

Aftercare support for children leaving care: Learning lessons from across Europe

30 April 2020, Académie Royale, Salle Chistrian de Duve, Rue Ducale 1, 1000 Brussels

About the conference

The experience for children and young people who are ‘ageing out’ of care differs wildly across Europe. Some national child protection systems provide support for young people preparing to leave care and provide psychosocial aftercare support, while others offer little to no preparation for an independent life after their time in care. Given that children and young people with care experiences are a highly vulnerable group, not receiving quality aftercare support during their transition from care can lead to life lasting costs at a human and wider societal level.¹

Eurochild, as part of the European Union (EU) funded [CarePath project](#), is convening a conference in Brussels for stakeholders from the childcare and protection fields. The conference aims to exchange knowledge on lessons from across Europe on existing aftercare practices, identify gaps in national policy, legislation and service provision relating to psychosocial aftercare, and investigate how change can be driven at EU level. Attendees will be invited from the EU institutions and international organisations, (sub-)national public authorities, NGOs, universities, corporates as well as care professionals and, most importantly, young people with experiences of care themselves.

Background

By the best available estimates, approximately 1 million children are in alternative care across Europe.² When these children reach the age of majority (18 in most European countries), they age out of child protection systems and transition to independent living. This is often a turbulent and exciting time for children from all backgrounds, as they rapidly gain independence through greater financial autonomy, the transition from education to employment, and a new social environment. However, for children in alternative care this is an especially vulnerable time: the formal support network provided by integrated child protection systems (including foster families and/or other care professionals) do not necessarily support the care leaver once they have aged out of care. International human rights frameworks identify aftercare as an important and necessary area for State support. The [United Nations Convention on the](#)

¹ For more information, see OECD (2019) [Changing the Odds for Vulnerable Children: Building Opportunities and Resilience](#); and UNESCO (2019) [Policy Paper 38: Education as healing: Addressing the trauma of displacement through social and emotional learning](#). Children with experiences of living in alternative care are over-represented in (available) national statistics relating to a host of social outcomes, in terms of physical and mental health costs, labour activity and costs to social, education and criminal justice systems. For example, see Heckman, J. and Karapakula, G. (2019) [The Perry Preschoolers at Late Midlife: A Study in Design-Specific Inference: working paper](#), National Bureau of Economic Research; and OECD/EU (2018) [Health at a Glance: Europe 2018: State of Health in the EU Cycle](#), which showed the costs of mental ill-health in Europe reaching 4% of GDP in 2018.

² Eurochild (2010) [National Surveys: Children in Alternative Care](#).



[Right of the Child \(Article 20\)](#) outlines that children deprived of a family environment are entitled to special protection and assistance by the State. The [UN Guidelines on Alternative Care \(paragraphs 131-136\)](#) outline how aftercare should prepare children for self-reliance and full integration into wider society. By aftercare, we refer to psychological and social support that is tailored to each individual, delivered by professionals who are appropriately trained to work with children who may have experienced trauma in their lifetimes. With strong aftercare support tailored specifically to the additional challenges that children and young people ageing out of care face, care leavers can successfully enter adulthood with the capacity to cope with independent living. Such aftercare needs to be focused on building resilience and self-reliance, as outlined in the UN Alternative Guidelines on Alternative Care. This type of psychosocial support is referred to as adopting a **trauma-informed care approach**, which is gaining prominence in a number of European countries.³

We are at an important crossroad in terms of EU legislation and influence. A new European Parliament was elected in May 2019, alongside a recently approved new College of Commissioners. Furthermore, debate between the EU institutions over the budgetary and strategic direction of the EU for the coming years is underway. The new EU budget for the period 2021-2027 has a number of important components, such as the European Social Fund+ and the proposed Child Guarantee within it: such components have the potential to transform the lives of children living in vulnerable circumstances, including children and young people ageing out of care.

With this legislative crossroad in mind, Eurochild's work on deinstitutionalisation continues to advocate for ending institutional care for all children in Europe. In line with the implementation of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, we promote family strengthening and family- and community-based care for children in alternative care. This includes aftercare for care leavers that is integrated into existing child protection systems.⁴

Within the [CarePath project](#), Eurochild and its partners across four Member States have developed **policy recommendations** for European, national and regional decision makers regarding the provision of aftercare that prioritises the psychosocial needs of children and young people who have been exposed to traumatic and adverse experiences. These recommendations will steer the conference's discussions and include:

- calling on the EU to recognise children leaving care as a vulnerable group and to issue guidance on supporting this group as set out in the 2009 UN Guidelines on the Alternative Care for Children;
- recommending that Member States establish national frameworks on the provision of aftercare for care leavers;
- establishing a national register to collect data to ensure that the needs of care leavers are met;

³ Having emerged in American and Australian schools of psycho-therapy, trauma-informed care is increasingly seeing adoption in Europe. In Sweden, [Save the Children \(Rädda Barnen\)](#) have been delivering trauma-informed care training to professionals for several years alongside Australian expert Dr Howard Bath. In Scotland, the [National Health Service Education for Scotland](#) have been implementing a National Trauma Training Framework across its services. There is also increased professional activity in this field amongst professionals in [Ireland](#) and the wider [United Kingdom](#)

⁴ [The 2009 UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children](#), Annex 1: Section VII, clearly stipulates aftercare provision



- supporting local authorities to deliver trauma-informed support for care leavers. This should include adequate preparation for leaving care before the child turns 18, and should involve active participation of children and young people in all decision-making processes;
- the formal departure from care should be extended beyond the age of majority based on individual capabilities where appropriate.

Conference aims

- The conference will raise the crucial need for the reform of national and regional child protection systems across the EU so that all children and young people receive aftercare upon leaving care.⁵
- Given the potential benefits for care leavers and society at large through quality aftercare, the conference will engage participants through knowledge exchange of existing practices, identifying gaps in provision and bridges to overcome these gaps, and investigating the role of the EU could play as a driver for change.
- The conference will also disseminate training resources and policy guidance developed under the *CarePath project: Empowering public authorities and professionals towards trauma-informed leaving care support* and other emerging learning communities in the growing field of aftercare.

Practices under the spotlight:

Eurochild members and relevant stakeholders are invited to submit an expression of interest to host workshop sessions relevant to leaving care, aftercare, psychosocial care & trauma-informed care. The call for expression is open until February 14 2020.

⁵ The conference builds on the important momentum of other projects advocating for strengthening aftercare for young people leaving care, including the *CarePath project*, SOS Children's Village International's *Leaving Care* project, the European Care Leaver Network and other projects funded under the EU *Rights, Equality and Citizenship Action Grant*

