

WELCOME TO AIF!

Welcome to the fourth – and final – newsletter from the Alternative Future (AIF) partners!

The project, funded by the European Commission under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, ran for two years, ending in December 2017. It aimed to develop resources that will enable staff who work with young people in residential care to better understand how the experience of violence affects them, how gender impacts on perceptions and experience of violence, and how to support the young people more effectively. Ultimately, Alternative Future aimed to reduce the risk of them becoming victims or perpetrators of violence in later life.

Six organisations were partners in the project. SURT (Fundació de dones) in Barcelona was the lead partner. SURT supports women who have been victims of abuse and has a strong track record in violence reduction approaches. The other partners were Animus (a provider of services to vulnerable children based in Sofia), Dissens (a gender education and research agency in Berlin), AMGI is a centre for masculinity research, education and psychosocial support, Innocenti (a child welfare and child policy organisation based in Florence) and Children in Scotland (the national network for child rights and wellbeing in Scotland).

THE AIF WEBSITE

The project has its own website. Find it at <http://alternativefuture.eu>.

On the website you will find detailed information about the project as well as regular updates on partners' activity and relevant news items.

Project overview

Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is unambiguous. Children have the right to be protected from all types of violence. For the past two years the Alternative Future project, funded by the European Commission, has involved collaboration between partners in six EU countries – Scotland, Austria, Bulgaria, Catalonia, Germany and Italy. Its end objective has been to reduce the incidence of violence through better understanding of the impact of living with violence, and through a number of actions aimed at overcoming its severe and enduring effects.

Because we were aware of the high incidence of experience of violence of young people in residential care, we carried out our fieldwork largely in this setting. We interviewed over 100 young people in residential care across the six countries. We also gathered information, through focus groups and an online survey, from over 200 residential care staff. Based on the information we gathered, we developed training programmes for staff working with young people in the care system. We also enabled direct support work with young people to be carried out and produced a catalogue giving practical guidance on activities and projects that can be carried out with young people to help them recognise and cope with issues of violence and trauma more effectively.

The young people gave willingly of their time even though this involved discussing issues that might have evoked quite difficult feelings for them, and wanted to use their knowledge and experience to help others. The staff also contributed a wealth of valuable information. Much of what they told us has significance beyond the life of the project.

The overwhelming majority of young people in the care system had experienced violence, often in multiple forms. This had affected their mental health, learning and social behaviour. Despite the fact that most staff had a relevant professional qualification, they indicated

that the young people they worked with often had needs that required specialised knowledge. If young people are to move on from the care system with optimism and confidence, we need to ensure that their needs are more effectively met, and that practitioners have the skills needed to do this.

Young people told us that they needed:

Reliability and Safety

This meant adequate supervision of all areas of residential care units, so that they always felt safe, and that there were no areas where they felt they might be at risk from others in the unit; that care establishments in which they were placed should, as far as possible, be located in communities with which they were familiar; that staff were able to restrain them, or other residents, if (and only if) there was a risk of someone being hurt, but never in ways that caused them pain; staff who were open and honest with them and who did not conceal information from them; and reassurance that their personal information would not be shared without their consent and would be represented accurately and truthfully.

Rest and Distraction

Almost all the young people we spoke to had a long history of distressing and traumatic experience; for many, however, a crisis had precipitated their entry to the care system. They therefore needed space and time to process what had happened to them, with the support of professionals who showed genuine interest in what they had been through, but were not intrusive in their approach. Consistency and stability were also important – regular routines had often been absent from their lives. Having ready access to exercise and sporting facilities was valued; many found it hard to avoid disturbed sleep so help with this was also important.

Belonging and Support

Sadly, for many of the young people, this was not their first experience of care. Some had had many readmissions and moves of placement. For children who perhaps had had little stability in their family lives, the care system had in too many cases not provided them with the security needed to overcome this. Young people felt it was essential that residential units promoted a sense of belonging and support. This meant that the initial contact with staff and other residents was welcoming, but in a spontaneous and uncontrived way; that they were supported, where they chose to do so, in maintaining relationships with family, friends and activities outside the unit and that they were enabled to choose the decoration of their personal space and to bring their own personal possessions. Having someone they could talk to about anything that mattered to them, and who would be accepting and understanding was important – this need not be a member of unit staff but could be a friend, relative or volunteer; they did, however, think that care staff should have knowledge of mental health and skills to help with any issues of emotional welfare.

Acceptance and Understanding

Like any other people, young people in residential care wanted professionals to respect their feelings. Many had suffered abuse within their families, but this did not necessarily mean that they did not love them or did not wish to have contact with them. It was important that staff understood that they may have conflicting emotions, particularly about these kinds of family issues. Young people had often found ways of coping with the stressful situations in which they had found themselves. They recognised that some of their coping methods did not always fit with unit rules – for example, watching television before bed as a means of relaxing in order to get to sleep – but felt these actions should be recognised for what they were rather than interpreted as wilful bad behaviour. They wanted to be accepted for who they were – some young people had

experienced rejection because of their sexuality or ethnicity. Being able to make relationships with the other residents was important and a workforce that was open and non-judgmental was vital.

Participation and Rights

The UNCRC, in Article 12, makes it clear that young people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them. This was very important to the young people, but they were clear that this meant they should be taken seriously and that the format of meetings should not be intimidating or challenging for them. Living in residential care can restrict opportunities for being alone and in some cases young people have limited space that is uniquely theirs. Having such space is important and all residential units should strive to provide it. Young people were also aware, however, that life outside care was often very different, and that they needed adequate support and preparation for moving on. They were also clear that, where, dispute or conflict had occurred, that some kind of resolution was reached and that things should not be left hanging over them.

Knowledge and Skills

Young people felt staff should all take the time and make the effort to know their past history and to understand how that might affect them. Many of them had extensive care records, but were not always confident that events and experiences significant in their lives were known to those looking after them. Helping them to become familiar with a new care placement was important – where things were kept, what the rules were, who the staff group were.

While they wanted to be welcomed, they did not feel comfortable with formal introduction meetings to a large group of staff and residents.

Residential care staff told us that they could offer more effective support if they had access to specialised

training on a number of topics. The areas in which they felt they could benefit from further learning were relationship building; overcoming trauma; understanding violence, its impact on wellbeing and its effects on behaviour; understanding diversity and children's rights and how they applied to the residential care context. This was entirely consistent with offering the kind of service the young people felt they needed.

Provision of training was part of the project content in each country being determined by the priorities identified by the interviews and survey data. In Scotland the focus of the learning was on 'Overcoming Trauma' and was based on social pedagogical principles. This was very well received by the care staff who attended and has contributed to important practice developments.

We can do better

Of course we acknowledge that not all harm to children and young people can be avoided. The Alternative Future project has, however, reinforced for us some important messages about how we can try to ensure that it is kept to a minimum.

- Given the extent of early adversity experienced by the young people, and the fact that family difficulties often recurred, probably the most important action that can be taken is to ensure that all families are provided with a sufficient level of support, in a non-stigmatised and non-discriminatory way, to reduce to a minimum those who need additional help.
- Our care system should never contribute to making bad experiences worse. Repeated readmissions, placement moves almost always to unfamiliar settings, inconsistent care cultures, frequent staff turnover and lack of adequate training all serve to exacerbate problems and reduce the positive impact of good work being done. Apart from the unsatisfactory and unequal outcomes for the young people, this is not effective use of scarce public resources.

- Violence and abuse is highly correlated with other kinds of disadvantage. It has enduring and negative impact. Eradicating violence should focus on addressing the circumstances that are strongly associated with violence as well as on therapeutic interventions for perpetrators, witnesses and victims, all of which require support and development for the workforce. While the staff and carers we spoke to showed consistent commitment and dedication in the face of many challenges, they were clear that they needed to be supported in this by ensuring that they received the specialist learning needed to do their job as well as possible.

- Respect for young people's rights in the care system takes many forms, and the young people we spoke to identified many practical ways in which it could be more effectively shown. The national care standards should reflect this, and young people should be provided with material on admission that clearly sets out what their rights are, and how they have access to recourse, advocacy and advice in the event of rights being compromised in any way.

Final symposium

Late November 2017 saw the culmination of two years of work as the project team assembled in Edinburgh for the concluding conference.

Our final event was a real success. Alongside presentations and workshops by project partners, speeches from Jimmy Paul and Laura Beveridge, both care experienced adults, were not only hugely engaging but very moving.

The feedback was good, from project partners and delegates. The Scottish team was delighted to welcome the other partners to Edinburgh and the rain stayed off for most of the time! The event took place at the Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Innovation – a recently renovated 18th century building on the Edinburgh University campus. Aply and insightfully chaired by Professor Mark Smith from Dundee

University, the keynote speech was given by Jimmy Paul who told of his inspiring journey from an abusive family, through the care system and on to university and a professional career. Project partners – Alba and Amanda from SURT and Marion from Children in Scotland – explained the original concept of the project, how its work was conducted and its key findings.

Over lunch we heard from colleagues at the City of Edinburgh Council about the social pedagogical based training they had received through the project, with Sylvia Holthoff who had delivered the training contributing from Germany by video. The afternoon saw another inspiring presentation from a care-experienced adult, this time from Laura Beveridge whose humour and honesty resonated with all present. Workshops by the European partners and a summing up from the chair concluded a lively and thought-provoking day.

The Transnational Good Practice Catalogue

The Transnational Good Practice Catalogue presents a set of successful practices that were applied and tested by the partners on the project for working with young people in residential care. It has the goal of providing professionals in such institutions with specific means to help young people in their care feel safer and more empowered while also applying a child-centered and gender-sensitive approach. The target audience of the catalogue are mostly professionals who are currently working with such youth or are generally interested in the topic, as well researchers, other professionals working with children in group format or in general interested in group work and interactive activities.

Support actions are listed according to three categories: 1) gender and intersectionality 2) safety from violence online and offline 3) child participation, emotional education and empowerment: valuing young people's thoughts, feelings and voices. Clearly some areas overlap, in particular the promotion of gender equality goes hand in hand with the prevention of violence. Moreover, the three areas are inter-related

and the support actions are best conducted in conjunction. Support actions are described in their practical implementation, in relation to the context, justification and best practices criteria.

The results achieved are listed as well as the challenges in the implementation and the evaluation and sustainability of action. Additional resources, contacts and comments on the evaluation of the support actions are also included.

Based on the evaluation of the actions carried out in the 6 European regions and looking at future directions in the work with young people some issues emerged as key. First of all, working towards the implementation of children's rights, ensuring a real participation for children living in RCF while at the same time ensuring their safety and protection is one of the most relevant challenges faced by professional. Another crucial area refers to the prevention of violence, including gender-based violence as violent behaviour are often normalized in the experience of young people living in RCF. To this aim, activities aimed at emotional education and the creation of safe space can be helpful tools. Finally, the focus on gender stereotypes, gender identity and the prevention of gender-based violence emerges as particularly relevant in order to provide these young people with the tools not to reproduce or been victims of violent behaviour as well as in order to make choices in their life which are not dependent on gender norms, but are oriented by their own skills, abilities and desires. We hope that the SA described in this toolkit can provide some valuable examples in this direction.

Project Summary

We have all benefited from our involvement in the project and have been left with many ideas to explore and plans we hope to develop. Most of all, we hope that we have contributed to helping children who have lived with violence avoid it blighting the rest of their lives.

There are many people to thank – the Life Changes Trust, that provided our match funding, the City of Edinburgh Council for its great support, the Scottish Government that was our associate partner, our European partners and all the staff and young people we spoke to.

The real challenge will be how to sustain and build on the work we started. The 'Alternative Future' we all look forward to is one where children live lives free from violence.

Partner information:



Associate partners and co-financers:

The Scottish Government Looked After Children Division is also supporting the project.



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