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What is the Complex for Social Services for Children and Families (CSSCF) in Ruse?

The complex is delegated by the state to provide community services to support children and their families as an alternative to institutional care for children at risk. It was founded in 2005 under a project of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, "Welfare Reform for Children in Bulgaria", financed mainly by the World Bank. From 2005 to 2009 the complex was managed by the "CARE" - Bulgaria and then its offshoot "EKIP".

Equilibrium has been providing integrated services for children and families since 2009 The complex offers 17 types of service aimed at children aged 0 to 18 and their families, pregnant women, foster parents and adoptive parents. These are dispersed across three areas of operation – a Centre for Community Support with an emergency accommodation unit, a Centre for Street Children and a Small Group Home providing family-type accommodation for youngsters with significant disabilities. Most of the clientele for these services are referred by the Child Protection Department but Equilibrium also responds to requests from other institutions and parents and children who directly seek help. We work with maternity hospitals, law courts, the probation service, schools, kindergartens and marginalized communities. Under the management of Equilibrium, the complex has built a national reputation and international recognition as one of the most advanced practices in the care of children and families.

How can we help?

The complex offers access to some of the country's most experienced specialists. (We receive numerous requests to share experience and best practices at regional, national and international level). The professional skills of our multidisciplinary team covers numerous areas: social worker, different fields of psychology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, medical professionals, consultants in family planning, pre / post-natal care, specialists in early childhood development and education specialists (eg special needs teaching, speech therapy). We have a team that offers training and supervision to fellow professionals and our expertise impacts on the entire world of childhood – social welfare, education, healthcare and so on. The main principle of our work is an integrated and systematic approach to the needs of children and their families: in school / kindergarten and community.

When can you contact us?

- If you need information about our organization and / or the services we offer
- If you have a problem and think one of our specialists can help.
- If someone close appears to have a problem and you are wondering how to help.
- If you are concerned about something you have witnessed concerning a child.



How can you reach us?

The complex for social services is located at Lipnik Blvd № 14 (former school "Hristo Smirnenki")

Our telephone is: 082/813386 or 0889813123 or 082/588 769

E-mail: office@eq-bg.com

site: www.eq-bg.com

Our official partners:

Open Society Club - Ruse (OSC): The involvement of OSC increases the quality of management at the complex. The organization has an impressive track record in project design and implementation. The public relations know how of OSC ensures that our work is made known at local, national and international level. We want to impact on the collective consciousness of the community and to encourage others to feel they have a stake in the activities at the complex. (For more information: www.oscrouse.org)

"Hope and Homes for children "- UK (HHC): Equilibrium partnered HHC in closing of the first home for medical and social care for children in Teteven and we continue to exchange insights drawn from our shared experience of working in Central and Eastern Europe. We collaborate closely with HHC within the Bulgarian government's deinstitutionalization programme and we derive a lot from the British organisation's extensive experience in the closure of institutions for children while we, in turn, provide access to experience and models of best practice in working with other vulnerable groups (For more information : www.hopeandhomes.org)

Our work can best be summarized as follows:

- Supporting vulnerable families to prevent children from falling into the system of institutional care. Additionally we support the development of alternative family care - foster care and adoption.
- Providing a family-type home and optimal care to develop the potential of eight children with complex disabilities transferred from the institution in Mogilino.

We achieve this by providing the following services:

- Wide-ranging support for families and children, legally defined as being at risk (including children with disabilities or learning difficulty);
- Campaigns, selection and training of foster parents;
- Support for the adoption process. Training and assistance to families with adopted children;
- Prevention of abandonment of newborns by various means, including the presence of a trained social worker and psychologist at the maternity hospital;
- Centre for Street Children - Prevention of neglect and reaction to circumstances that place children in jeopardy. Prevention of problem behaviour and dropping out of schools, as well as working with young offenders;
- Emergency accommodation with a capacity for 4 children aged 0 to 18 years;



- Family-type accommodation for children with disabilities;
- Working with the educational community and with different target groups in kindergartens, schools and homes for children deprived of parental care,
- Support youths subject to probation and assistance for children who have problems with the law (and their families);
- An extensive range of club activities and events of interest to children and young people;
- Developing programmes allowing young people to participate in the community;

and more:

- We have close working relationships with Ruse's Child Protection Department and the Directorate of Social Assistance;
- We serve on the management board of Bulgaria's National Network for Children;
- We provide technical support to the national deinstitutionalization programme;
- We have contributed to the development of policy in childcare and social services through effective participation in changing legislation;
- We have built a lasting partnership with the Ruse's "Angel Kunchev" University by providing work experience for students in Occupational Therapy and Social Pedagogy.

Brief History of Complex:

- Official opening on October 3rd, 2005 - the culmination of the World Bank project. The complex consists of: Centre for Social Support with Emergency Placement Unit, Centre for Street Children, and another specialist service – a refuge for mothers and babies was housed in a separate, purpose built facility,
- The complex is a state-delegated activity of Ruse Municipal Authority who monitor our activities and to whom we are accountable,
- The main building is shared with the Child Protection Department of the city's Directorate of Social Assistance,
- Equilibrium has managed the complex since July 1st, 2009, but have been actively involved with the facility since it was first established (training and technical support, activities for children, etc.),
- Equilibrium is partnered by the Open Society Club - Ruse, and managing the complex is a joint venture,
- During 2008, the mother and baby refuge was transformed into family-type accommodation for children with disabilities and it is home for eight youngsters transferred from the institution in Mogilino,
- A play and therapy room was opened on August 27th, 2009 at the Centre for Social Support. It was funded by a local philanthropist and created by our own team,
- On 2nd September in the same year, a sensory garden was created by our own team at the family-type home. It was partly funded by donations,
- The complex is formally recognized as an example of international best practice in the context of the international COPORE conference in Amsterdam and is featured in a publication that is distributed worldwide. COPORE is an acronym = COmpetencies for POverty REduction,
- During 2011, we formed a multidisciplinary, early intervention team to provide a



comprehensive range of services to families with preschool children who are disabled or who suffer from developmental problems. The new team contains a physiotherapist and an occupational therapist,

- In 2010 and 2011 our experts joined the implementation team for the closure of Teteven's institution for the medical and social care of infants. It was the first such closure in the country. Our team continues to support the government in implementing the programme of deinstitutionalization and the development of new social services to improve the conditions and quality of life of children in Bulgaria,
- Recently, we have sought, developed and implemented a range of alternative methods of working with children including puppet therapy, play therapy, psychodrama, colour therapy, aromatherapy, self-expression through art, nature therapy and performance therapy. We have developed a training programme for our fellow professionals. For more information, refer to the 'EQ as Trainers' directory on our website,
- Since 2012, Equilibrium has partnered the Bulgarian branch of Hope and Homes for Children (HHC-BG) in the closure of a baby institution in Ruse. We also provide technical assistance to support the closure of a further seven homes for the medical and social care of infants under the Ministry of Health's programme "DIRECTION: Family" that is supported and enhanced by the HHC's project 'Strategic deinstitutionalization and reform of care for children age 0 to 3 years'.

We partner:

Karin Dom Foundation: Karin Dom's facility in Varna is widely recognized as a centre of excellence for children with special needs. It is also a valuable training and resource centre where members of our team were provided with the specialist knowledge that enabled us to create a multidisciplinary team to provide an early intervention programme for parents of children with developmental problems. The methodology and techniques were introduced in Bulgaria by Karin Dom.

Arena Media: Equilibrium and Arena have worked in cooperation for many years. This partnership provides the complex with a public profile and Arena contribute significantly to public debate on sensitive social issues. (For more detailed information: www.arenamedia.net)

Ruse Municipality: In 2009, Equilibrium and Open Society Club submitted a technical proposal for management of the complex and won the tender. We work under contract with the municipal authority.

Child Protection Department (CPD) of Directorate of Social Services, Ruse: The CPD makes formal referrals when children are seen to be at risk and we work closely to protect the children in their family environment and in the development of foster care.



How do we operate in the sphere of education?

Educational Resource Group

Our primary point of contact is the Education Resource Group which meets at the complex in the last week of every month. This contact enables our experts to become well acquainted with school counselors, psychologists and teachers to discuss important issues and opportunities to collaborate. We have two main objectives:

- 1 Discuss cases of specific children / families where there are indicators of risk,
- 2 Developing a joint strategy for early intervention to tackle problems that impact on academic performance and the overall well-being of the child in school.

Clubs and Interest Groups

The complex in Lipnik Boulevard provides a varied programme throughout the year that caters for the multiple interests of children during both the school terms and holidays. The main areas are: applied arts, jewelery, communication and social skills, nature study, hiking, rock climbing, martial arts, juggling, dance, drama, puppetry, an introduction to journalism, photography etc.

Special Sessions with Students

We were invited to provide interactive sessions with children (usually during school hours) and they were mainly focused on the themes of aggression, violence and bullying. In some cases, we were asked to demonstrate to our colleagues from school, techniques to address sensitive issues with students (and parents).

Sessions with children or teaching teams have been performed in:

- "Vasil Levski" General High School
- School of European Languages "St Constantine and Cyril the Philosopher";
- High school "I. I. Pavlov
- "Professional School of Fashion" Nedka Ivan Lazarova ",
- School of Mathematics" Baba Tonka
- "PrimarySchool" Vasil Aprilov
- "ProfessionalSchool of River Shipbuilding and Navigation;
- Vocational School of Industrial technology" Atanas Burov Tsonev.

The first conclusion drawn from this experience is that discipline problems and demonstrations of aggression in school require the concerted efforts of multidisciplinary teams of professionals - representatives of both the educational and social welfare sectors – that have the capacity to deal with complex family and social problems that underlie deviant behaviour in children. At the same time, we must implement effective strategies to support victims of bullying / violence.

We have also recognized that we need methods to encourage and reinforce **positive behaviours** among the majority of students using alternative, innovative and interactive methods that draw on the positive aspects of popular culture. On the basis of these findings, Equilibrium is adopting a youth-oriented approach under two new programmes:



- Music Academy
- Creativity Centre

Music Academy

The focus is on musical performance but avoiding any sense of competition or the grooming of ‘talented performers’ and teenagers are given the opportunity to

- Express themselves creatively,
- Win recognition and approval
- Collaborate with adult enthusiasts
- Plan and develop their own projects and performances.

Equilibrium’s Music Academy provides youngsters with a personalized venue, space and the resources / expertise to enable them to present their ideas publicly in a creative way to supportive audience. A key factor of the programme is to promote cooperation between students from different schools and their interaction outside the classroom.

Creativity Centre

Equilibrium has designed and piloted three workshops including modules for planning, implementation and evaluation of community projects in the field of culture, ecology, education, community development, philanthropic causes and more.

During the second phase of the programme, students develop their real team projects. They are supported by the Equilibrium team to realize their ideas and assess the impact of their projects.

The longer-term goal of this programme is promotion of social entrepreneurship among teenagers in / around schools, in their neighbourhoods and in the city at large. Thus we raise the level of cooperation between schools and those providing social services for children and families, focusing on projects that are planned and run by young people.

Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide

It has proved uneconomical and logistically difficult to keep village schools operational and, increasingly, children who live in rural areas travel to regional centres to attend school. This is not always a happy experience for the children involved. Through our contact with schools we have come to understand that ‘village children’ are frequently clustered in under-achieving classes. The same children will probably also find it difficult to participate in extra-curricular activity and their homes will almost definitely lack digital connectivity.

In response to this problem, EQ supports youth activity in the village of Dryanovets (approximately 60 kilometres from Ruse). The village is a weekend and holiday base for teenagers from several cities in NE Bulgaria (Ruse, Razgrad and Shoumen). Under guidance from EQ, these teenagers use their computer literacy, digital capability and enthusiasm for music, dance and drama to encourage less fortunate village residents



(including a significant number of Roma children) to use their free time and talents for the benefit of the village. Participation has increased markedly since the venture started and, supported by the mayoress and village librarian, the teenagers succeed in sustaining their own concert programme, participating in regional cultural events and undertaking modest fundraising in support of the community hall and pensioners' club.

Having grown since 2006, the model has proved its sustainability and is duplicable as an effective method of bridging the urban-rural socio-economic and digital divides that contribute to the social and educational disadvantage of those children whose homes are at a distance from the main conurbations. Additionally, the model has proved its effectiveness for the integration of Roma into informal youth activity that is both productive and educational.

Outdoor Adventure

At the complex of social services we work with children whose behaviour can be very challenging and aggression is a problem we encounter regularly. The problem escalates when you bring children from different backgrounds together into groups. Increasingly, schools and kindergartens encounter children who fall into the following categories:

- inattentive, but not hyperactive or impulsive
- hyperactive and impulsive, but capable of paying attention
- Inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive.

These conditions can be attributed to both genetic predisposition and environmental factors. The situation is not fully understood.

Canadian author Richard Louv, who created the term "Nature Deficit Disorder", presents a very convincing argument for the curative power of nature. There is a growing body of evidence showing that outdoor adventure and immersion in nature can have significant effects on hyperactivity, concentration and self-control.

Therefore, we look upon our **adventure-oriented summer camp** (a 'tradition' at the complex) as an essential component of the work we do with children and young adults. We are lucky to enjoy ease of access to the Rusenski Lom Natural Park and we have developed a year-round outdoor repertoire that ranges from rock climbing and cave exploration to the study of the exceptional variety of flora and fauna that thrives in the limestone gorges of the park.

