

## THE EQ APPROACH TO MANAGING FAMILY-TYPE PLACEMENT CENTRES FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

### Background: Difficulties experienced in launching family-type placement centres in Bulgaria

In the context of implementing the Bulgarian government’s Action Plan in deinstitutionalization as a means to fulfilling the national ‘Vision for De-institutionalisation of Children in Bulgaria’ (2010), difficulties were encountered with the sequencing and timing of project actions relating to the development of family-type placement centres (FTPCs) for children and young adults with disabilities.

In its 2014 report entitled “Deinstitutionalisation of Children in Bulgaria – How Far and Whereto? (Sofia, June, 2014) UNICEF provides an insight into the difficulty when describing the rolling out of the Action Plan by means of five separate projects each with its own implementation criteria –

“The structure of the activities... appears to have been informed fairly significantly by the different types of EU and Bulgarian Government funding which were allocated to its implementation.”

Soft measures such as “planning, technical assistance, training, child assessments, child preparation and post-placement support” were funded through the Human Resources Operational Programme while the actual building of FTPCs (and other community-based facilities such as day centres) was funded through the Regional Development Operational Programme. The soft measures were **phased separately** from the building and infrastructure actions. Additionally, economic considerations largely determined both the timing of the transfers of disabled children and young adults from large residential institutions to FTPCs and the number of children that were transferred at one time. Questions were raised about the extent to which these economic factors were allowed to supersede consideration of the best interests of each child?

In the context of her public address to the 14<sup>th</sup> IPSCAN conference in Bucharest, Dr. Maria Herczog, president of Eurochild, alluded to compromises made in the development of small-group homes in Romania. She could equally well have been talking about Bulgaria. Reference was made to the increase in working capacity from the recommended limit of 8 children to 12 (a financial compromise) and the potential for the creation of a new system of smaller institutions because of a combination of inadequate resources and a failure to move completely to an ethos that encourages community-based care of those with significant special needs.

In its “Report Card 2015: What is the average Government score for childcare?”, the National Network for Children referred to the need for speedy finalization of a mechanism for re-directed resources released on the basis of closing residential institutions to provide for the sustainability of

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EU-funded social services. Additionally, it refers to the serious need to alter state-delegated funding mechanisms for community-based services to introduce a system of differentiation that takes better account of cost differentials among target groups. It focused on the fact that municipal authorities are finding it difficult to hire and retain care staff raising questions about the adequacy of remuneration and training.

## **EQ – Positivity based on longevity of experience**

EQ has made its views known at policy level. However, in the context of delivering day-to-day care to children and young adults with special needs, dwelling on difficulties is highly counter-productive. No organisation can pursue quality from a standpoint of adverse criticism and negativity.

We are actually fortunate in three major respects –

1. We have been directly involved in the management of care services in the context of family-type accommodation since the introduction of the concept in Bulgaria. The Ruse facility for disabled children commonly known as the Pink House has been the focus of authoritative review over the years and it has been used as a source of practical know-how.
2. We manage the centre of social support of children and families and the street children centre from which we draw intellectual and material resources
3. Through dogged campaigning, extensive media relations and the development of a strong and sustainable relationship with the local community, EQ has contributed to disability awareness in the Ruse region. These relationships provide confidence, a steady flow of material support and access to community resources.

On the basis of our resource-base and experience, EQ experts were invited to play a major role in preparing and supporting the transmission and adaptation of children and young adults from large residential institutions to three new facilities in Ruse during 2014. In April, 2015, EQ officially took over the management of two of these facilities (known as Love and Hope) where young adults are accommodated.

The key tenets of the operational philosophy behind family-type accommodation are socialization and maximization of opportunity. Both entail planning, decision-making and consistent pursuit of goals based on professional assessment of the capabilities of each individual resident. Young adults removed from large residential institutions are not only victims of physical and / or mental disability, they will – almost inevitably – suffer from the effects of institutionalization – a complex syndrome linked to failure of attachment, profound sensory deprivation, excessive dependence on minimalist routines and years spent surviving as opposed to living.

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### **A clear vision.....a shared vision**

We try to ensure clarity of purpose (it is expressed in an explicit and understandable manner) and then to assure ourselves that the purpose is shared by all personnel whose actions impact on the lives of those youngsters in our care.

This means that the models and learning that we draw from national and international sources are comprehensively localized and vividly interpreted for EQ personnel.

### **Core principles**

#### ***A multiple intelligences approach***

Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence model combined with more recent neuro-scientific contributions to learning theory provides a framework for understanding the intelligences of children and young adults who are – and who are likely to remain – academically disadvantaged.

#### ***IMPACT – a coherent and constructive approach to challenging behaviour***

From our perspective, many behavioural patterns demonstrated by youngsters with special needs are disruptive, challenging or antisocial. By taking judgementalism out of the equation and understanding that these actions are functional from the child's perspective (they fulfil a purpose), we can both avoid unnecessarily placing children in situations that provoke crisis (by creating a supportive environment) and gently teach them to use strategies that better align with social norms.

#### ***Social participation***

Social inclusion involves a great deal more than simply placing youngsters with special needs in mainstream environments. More often than not there is an element of risk and uncertainty, but the key to providing positive, transformative experience is assessment of the Opportunity Value of social occasions. This means that we look closely at our event calendar and the activities taking place in and around the Ruse complex while we also analyze the growing capabilities and expanding inclinations of the youngsters we care for. We focus on the potential for genuine enjoyment and personal growth.

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### ***The natural world***

Almost without exception, deinstitutionalized children and young adults have had negligible experience of the world of nature – this is a significant component of their profound sensory deprivation. We are lucky to have access to a base in the Black Sea village of Tyulenovo. We also collaborate with other organizations that manage holiday facilities for groups of youngsters who have special needs. Members of our care teams always accompany the youngsters as they recognize the ways in which each youngster registers pleasure, anxiety or sensory overload. They know their capabilities and their energy thresholds. They can gently encourage each individual to explore while feeling safe and secure.

### ***Personal identity and freedom of choice***

We place great emphasis on acknowledging and recording personal preferences, relationships and capabilities. While there are limits to how flexible we can be, we find that great benefits arise for both the youngsters and the professional carers when we plan expansively from a positive perspective (eg on the basis of the capabilities of the various youngsters) as opposed to taking the traditional approach rooted in pessimism (eg focusing on disability and medical issues).

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