



Hope & Homes for Children



Joint Statement on Governing Principles for De-institutionalisation of Childcare in Bulgaria



Hope and Homes for Children (HHC) has led the closure of more children's institutions in SEE and CEE than any other organisation and its closure package is recognised as international best practice. Equilibrium (EQ) is a significant provider of childcare and educational services in Bulgaria. EQ's hands-on expertise is increasingly becoming widely recognised.

HHC and EQ share the view that Bulgaria's deinstitutionalisation programme must have six essential features in order to succeed:

1. The reform of the childcare system should be focused on children, their wellbeing and with respect for their rights, most important the right to live in a family.

- All efforts should be made to ensure children remain with their parents and receive adequate support at community level.
- No children under the age of 3 should be placed in residential care irrespective of the size of the residential care facility.
- Kinship care and national adoption should be priorities wherever possible.
- Foster care and specialist foster care for children with disabilities are the most suitable alternative care solutions for children who need care.
- Residential care in small group homes integrated at community level and based on parent educators or childcare staff models for a maximum number of 10 children should be used as the last resort for children unable to return home or to be placed in foster care.
- In all circumstances, for children remaining in care, ongoing contact with parents and family members should be a priority with a view to enabling their return home or to transition into independent life.

2. Comprehensive deinstitutionalisation starts with the closure of all institutions for babies.

- Institutions for babies represent the most significant entry point into the childcare system. Children will continue to enter the childcare system in significant numbers if these facilities are not shut down irrespective of the style of the other services that are in place.
- Early institutional care has an impact on the development of a child's brain and impairs their ability to form attachments to other people, delays their social and behavioural development as well as their cognitive development.
- No children under the age of 3 should be placed in residential care irrespective of the size of the residential care facility.
- The closure of institutions for babies can be achieved through the development of family support services and the development of adequate alternative care.
- Emergency foster care as well as emergency reception units for children over the age of 3 should provide, short-term care, until a suitable medium to long-term solution is found in the alternative care system. The capacity required for emergency care can be identified based on the number of children placed in the institution.

3. Deinstitutionalisation means the closure of institutions; institutions defined as residential care facilities for more than 12 children.

- Institutions must close and funds that were previously directed towards their operation should be diverted to a rational and effective system of alternative services into which personnel from the old services are transferred after they have undertaken the requisite training.
- A strategy based on the phased closure of institutions by means of a gradual reduction in the number of children in old-style institutions is a high-risk strategy likely to fail.
 - i. Funding for institutions is allocated per child and therefore will trigger concerted efforts by institutions to recruit enough children in order to ensure their sustainability.
 - ii. If the number of children drops under a certain level, the funding per capita will not be sufficient to cover basic core costs and will need supplementing otherwise the conditions for children left behind will deteriorate.
 - iii. The development of alternative care services, while continuing funding existing institutions, will result in an expensive and unsustainable childcare system.

- iv. When reaching the stage of actually closing institutions, all alternative care services are fully staffed and personnel in institutions has no alternatives. Their situation becomes a social and political problem and staff in institutions is very likely to resist any further changes.
- v. Deinstitutionalisation is a complete shift in mentalities and ways of providing services for children, the very existence of old style institutions in the childcare system is a contradiction and usually acts as a strong resistance factor to change.

4. Deinstitutionalisation should be planned at regional level by documenting the specific reasons for institutionalisation. Using this information family support services (prevention) and alternative care services can then be designed to match the needs of all children in institutions targeted for closure as well as prevent other children being placed in care.

- Piecemeal closure programmes operating at municipal level are ineffective. Fully integrated regional programmes create a critical mass and a trained workforce capable of transferring its skills and knowledge to adjoining regions and future generations.
- A regional assessment will identify the location for prevention services as well as the size and range of the alternative care system.
- Residents of an old-style institution may not have any family in the district where their institution is based. To facilitate reintegration or, at the very least, future contact with the extended family, children leaving institutions should be cared for in the area where their family lives.
- A regional approach will avoid duplication of services and will enable the use of existing resources and facilities, including institution buildings, if appropriate in the most effective and suitable way.
- A regional approach will enable resources used previously to finance running costs of institutions to be ring fenced and used for the alternative care system.

5. Capacity building and training should be comprehensive and developed on a clear needs assessment after all services to be developed are designed.

- All childcare personnel and professionals should be trained in deinstitutionalisation as the most important building block for changing mentalities and enabling the wider reform process.
- All professionals in childcare should be trained to understand basics of prevention and family support work as well as the specific features of alternative care services.
- Specific and standardised training should be developed and made available to childcare staff in institutions to enable their transition in the newly developed services, as well as their participation in children's transition from institutions.
- Training should be on an ongoing basis in line with the changing needs of children in care.

6. For a comprehensive and effective reform process a national and regional coordination system should be developed.

- Regional coordination will ensure deployment of resources based on children's needs and agreed service design ensuring resources follow children and are not allocated on a political basis.
- Regional co-ordination will ensure local authorities at all levels will work proactively with adjoining districts and share funding needs.
- Other service providers should be informed and take an active part in the reform process.
- Regional coordination should include all key stakeholders.



Hope & Homes for Children

East Clyffe, Salisbury,
Wiltshire SP3 4LZ
United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)1722 790111

Fax +44 (0)1722 790024

Email info@hopeandhomes.org

www.hopeandhomes.org

Registered Charity No. 1089490



27A Borisova Str. Apt. 8,
Ruse 7000
Bulgaria

Tel (+359) 82 837618

Email office@eq-bg.com

www.eq-bg.com

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