



Ministerstwo Rodziny,
Pracy i Polityki Społecznej



The Warsaw Roundtable on Deinstitutionalisation and Foster Care in the Baltic Sea Region:

Promoting new efforts to ensure the best interests of children

The countries in the Baltic Sea Region are continuing their efforts in transitioning from institutions to other forms of foster and family care when there is a need to find alternatives to the biological family. Governments and NGO's are advocating for the need to change from the old structures to more flexible ways of assessing the needs of the individual child and family and to continue discussing methodology and evidence-based quality standards.

The participants in the Warsaw Roundtable decided:

- **To follow-up the Tallinn Recommendations on Alternative Care and Family Support.**
- **To take due note of the recent developments as described in the Warsaw Roundtable on deinstitutionalisation and foster care.**
- **To encourage investment in an appropriate set of services for families who bring up children, ensure that families get easy accessible and more and better support, to support the professionalization of foster care through sound financing and professional training, to ensure that institutions is a solution only in exceptional situations and support the need for preparing foster children who are leaving foster care to an independent adult life. In addition, it is important to improve the coordination and cooperation between the actors involved in alternative care in order to reduce the tendency for each actor and entity to keep to themselves.**

In April, 2016, the Polish chair of the CBSS Expert Group on Children at Risk, invited the representatives from the Member States of the Council of the Baltic Sea States to discuss deinstitutionalization and foster care. In her introductory remarks, the chair, Ms Katarzyna Napiórkowska from the Polish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, referred to the long history of the Expert Group being engaged in ensuring quality care for children including for those children lacking a stable family environment. Ms Napiórkowska mentioned in particular the high level Expert Meeting on Family Support and Alternative Care in Tallinn in May 2015 and the regional recommendations. The Roundtable meeting should be seen as a follow up of this meeting. What are the main changes since May 2015, what are the achievements and challenges?

“I got a foster family late – but not too late!”

There are many challenges for all involved when the child care system in a country decides to remove a child from his or her biological family and place the child in foster care. In the Roundtable meeting the participants were very fortunate to listen to Gabriela Ryszczuk, a young person, who had herself been placed in foster care. Gabriela Ryszczuk told that her life in the biological family had been very tough and that she also had to act as a mother for her younger brother. Gabriela had problems in school and difficulty to relate to peers. However, the worst part was the lack of interest from extended family, school and social service. Many knew about the situation but nobody responded.

Finally, at 15, she was placed in foster care. According to Gabriela, this happened far too late but happily not too late. The foster parents have provided her with warmth, affection and patience. She says that she never expected that a relationship like the one she got could exist between parents and children. The foster parents did reach out to her from the very beginning and gradually she became able to attend school on a regular basis and to concentrate better with the school work. For a long time Gabriela worried that she would become like her mother but the foster parents kept pointing to her own strengths and capacities. “I never believed it was possible to change the environment like what has happened with me. My foster parents support me at every level, they discuss with me and in the end they let me take my own decisions”.

According to Gabriela, family is a precious thing and you can get family from different people. “Even if we did not know each other from my birth I can totally rely on my parents and new siblings. I love them and they care about me. We have difficulties but we always overcome the difficulties”. Gabriela Ryszczuk, is now in her early twenties and working as an educator in a community centre. “I hear the argument that children should not be removed from their parents - and parents and families should be given maximum support to be better able to take care of their children. However, if the biological parents are not able to care for their children, and when they are pulling the children down, then children will do better with the support from foster parents who want to be there for them. Children should not feel guilty or having regrets but rather see the change as a gift. For me it was a great gift to get a new family. Without this kind of support children cannot make it. I got a second chance and I took advantage of it!”

Priority to the family and children; from institutions to dynamic team work in Poland

Mr Bartosz Marczuk, Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy presented the values, policies and the 500 + program introduced by the Polish government. A strong family forms the basic unit of the nation and the family unit is to be strengthened through the 500 plus program. The program has 3 main objectives including supporting a higher birth rate; investing in people and human capital and reducing the high level of poverty. Thus, the Government has increased the economic support to the family from the second child and until the child turns 18. The government is investing in both foster care and in preventive work to avoid children being separated from their families. Currently, Poland is faced with challenges such as a very low reproduction rate and massive emigration of young people. 1.5 mill people left Poland the last years for economic reasons. Mr Bartosz Marczuk concluded his presentation by showcasing that demography and prosperity are key factors when negotiating with other and wealthier countries.

Edyta Wojtasińska and Joanna Luberadzka-Gruca from the Polish Foster Care Coalition represent 20 organisations working with foster care. They explained that children, who cannot stay with their biological parents, have a greater chance of a normal development when they are placed in foster families. In Poland 42 percent of children in foster care are staying with relatives, 30 percent with foster families, 20 percent in a residential childcare facility and the rest in different other forms of care. Edyta Wojtasińska elaborated that the 500 + program also include financial support to foster families thus encouraging the institution of foster care if the biological parents cannot support the children. According to Wojtasińska and Luberadzka-Gruca the system is now better able to give individual support to the children and foster family setting. The child care residential settings have also improved with fewer children in each institution and there are more and better trained specialists and therapeutic solutions. However, it is still a challenge to get specialised foster families for disabled children. Other challenges at the moment is to provide enough foster families in the bigger cities, the establishment of small, specialised facilities to care for teenagers and mobilising local governments and family courts to co-operate and make joint decisions concerning the child. The Coalition advocates also for a smooth transfer from foster and family care to adoption and they work to promote good practices in order to demonstrate how they have been successful.

Franciszek Bronk and Jarosław Józefczyk explained about the deinstitutionalization process in the City of Gdynia and the provision of services. According to Bronk and Józefczyk there has been a long process of change to find other solutions than institutions for children needing care outside their families. First of all, they had to overcome the resistance to change in itself and to find the arguments and initiatives that could demonstrate that a change could be useful for all groups and stakeholders. Change leaders were identified to start work on a new dynamic structure involving team work among the multitude of concerned sectors and professions. People were not used to work as a team but found it easier as the change leaders had worked out an overview of tasks and responsibilities and the continuum of services needed for the different situations that could arise in the life of the child. Even the social worker needed to be re-educated from just putting the child into an institution to develop individual solutions for each child and family. Bronk and Józefczyk stressed that for 10 years they did not use the deinstitutionalization language, they only ensured that the change happened gradually. They focused on the actual needs, listened to people and discussed how best to find solutions for the children and to prepare them for adult life. According to Bronk and Józefczyk, the municipalities need a pallet of services and specialists who can recognize the needs of children and respond accordingly. A culture of planning and reflections, strategy and actions that are coherent and logical based upon common efforts and one management has been developed. All issues are now discussed by a multi-disciplinary and interagency team including the support to the child and the responsibilities of the parents. Lastly, Bronk and Józefczyk stressed that they had less financial support but that they managed to change the structure and develop support services of high quality all the same.

Reorganising the child protection system and the use of PRIDE and MST in Iceland

In Iceland, they were also through a process of change of structures by for instance reducing the local child protection authorities from 70 to 27. Around the same time measures were taken to enhance awareness for professionals to report child abuse and for the local services to provide appropriate support by various means. The national child protection authority coordinates local child protection authorities and provides specialised services such as Barnahus, treatment facilities, qualified foster parents. If necessary there will be a dialogue

between central and local in order to find the appropriate foster parents. All children who cannot live with biological parents get foster care.

The foster parents are trained in the *PRIDE Model of Practice*, which gives the child welfare agencies a standardized, consistent, structured framework for the competency-based recruitment, preparation, assessment, selection, of foster and adoptive parents, and for foster parent in-service training and ongoing professional development. PRIDE stands for; Parent, Resources for Information, Development, and Education and intend to develop and support foster and adoptive families as team members in child protection and trauma informed care of children.

Some children in biological families need specialized treatment in particular when they are involved in antisocial and/or criminal behavior. From early 2007, Iceland has used Multisystemic Therapy (MST), which is an intensive family- and community-based treatment program focusing on addressing environmental systems that impact chronic and violent juvenile offenders such as their homes and families, schools and teachers, neighbourhoods and friends. MST recognizes that each system plays a critical role in a youth's world and each system requires attention when effective change is needed to improve the quality of life for youth and their families. MST works with the toughest offenders ages 12 through 17. In Iceland they decided to close down many institutions apart from 3 for this group of youngsters as the institutions themselves sometimes became a breeding ground for even more violent behaviour and replace it with effective MST based support to parents and the children. MST is a massive treatment package where the parents are the key in a 3 to 4 months treatment programme.

In other countries, such as in Sweden, they have not had that good results using MST, however, it is a question about motivating the parents according to the Icelandic experience. Parents are offered the option of MST, they are encouraged and motivated and the vast majority are willing to try.

Paradigm shift in Sweden from the 1980'ies

Foster care has had a long tradition in Sweden but it was not before in the end of the 1950'ies that it was decided to close down most of the institutions for in particular disabled children and mentally ill persons. But major change had happened even from 1940 with the establishment of child health centres, from 1943 the government started to contribute to day care and pre-schools for small children and in 1948 the families were given a child allowance as a support to the family and to stimulate population growth. New legislation was introduced in 1960 defining the responsibility and care for children and young persons. Foster care was to be prioritized and the authorities were to have a holistic view on the situation of children and their needs. Sweden was the first country in the world to ban corporal punishment of children in all settings. By today, all countries in the Baltic Sea Region have legislation against corporal punishment in all settings except for Lithuania and Russia.

In 1981, the institutions were regulated and called homes for care and residence and in 1982 the Social Service Act was introduced. The Social Service Act implied a paradigm shift away from the view of the society needing to be protected from neglected, unwanted, abandoned and depraved children to a view of the need to support and protection of children and young persons. It also implied a fundamental shift in the social services from an authoritarian attitude to and attitude of placing importance on dialogue and inclusion. Investments were high to professionalise and promote a solid methodology for the work. Early intervention and

family support, children's participation and consent from parents and children were other important tools in this change in Swedish social work. In 2014, 28700 children were in care and approximately 60 percent in foster care. The BBIC model is in work in almost all municipalities (99 percent) which is a national uniform knowledge based structure for assessment, planning and follow up in child social services. The BBIC intend to strengthen the child's situation in social services for children and families, improving cooperation on the child between family caregivers and the social network, ensure a more structured management and through national unity in the assessment, planning and monitoring, strengthen legal certainty and quality.

Fewer children in Estonia – but more children need assistance

In Estonia, it is noted that while there during the last year has been a drop of the total number of children, the number of children needing assistance has increased. However, the total number of children placed in alternative care has decreased over the years. Children needing alternative care are mostly placed in substitute homes, in foster care or in guardian's family. It is more common to adopt the youngest children and around 20 percent of the children are returned to biological family. The substitute homes have been through a major change from former big buildings to family houses with fewer children in each home and with family "heads" living with the children full time. It has also become a trend that former foster parents start substitute homes.

The Social Welfare Act regulates the substitute home service and foster care, while the Family Law Act regulates guardianship and adoptions. Recently, a green paper on alternative care of children has been developed to provide a systematic approach to ensure the welfare and rights of children in alternative care. The Green paper builds upon the strategic policy framework in the Development Plan for 2012-2020, the new Child Protection Act from 2016 and financial support has been given from the European Social fund. The Green Paper sets out to increase the family-based care including foster care, develop new forms of alternative care, increase the quality of all forms of alternative care and ensure a more efficient after care system for children leaving alternative care. A communication strategy is developed to ensure the recruitment of more families and they will get PRIDE training, supportive services and more financial support. Other details in order to raise the quality and offer special services are also planned.

Evaluation and reforms in Germany

The German Constitution obliges parents to care for and bring up their children. If parents are unable to fulfil their responsibility, the state assumes parental responsibility as a guardian on a subsidiary basis. The State may protect and promote parental responsibility and supervise its exercise, but may not suppress or curtail it. The role of guardian is to ensure the best interests of the child. The ratio of family-based versus institutional care in Germany is balanced: Of the children in alternative care, 47 percent are placed in family-based care and 53 percent in institutional care. The Social Code does not provide for any preference of family-based over institutional care. The decision on the type of placement is to be guided entirely by an assessment of the best interests of the individual child. The Code of Social Law of Youth and Welfare Services affords an entitlement to support in cases where the best interest of a child or adolescent is not guaranteed; this includes an entitlement to family support and alternative care. The national law provides specifically for the rights of children in alternative care to issue complaints, including against the staff of residential institutions.

Recently, the Federal Government evaluated the implementation of the 2012 Child Protection Law which regulates key measures of family support, childcare and protection. The evaluation shows that participation and complaint mechanisms in institutional care have been formally implemented to a large extent. There is, however, evidence that the effectiveness of the mechanism can be raised further. Hence the evaluation report states that further legislative measures are needed to ease the process of establishing external ombudsmen. The Code of Social Law of Youth and Welfare Services, which obliges public providers to develop and apply quality standards in alternative care, is also under evaluation. It is recognized that there is room for improvement as regards the nationwide implementation of the development and application of quality standards in alternative care. Moreover, participation of private service providers for developing quality standards is necessary and will be considered.

The envisaged reform of the Code of Social Law of Youth and Welfare Services touches upon a variety of issues. One intent is to do away with the dispersed responsibility for the care of children with disabilities under the current system. Care for these children is currently regulated by different Codes of Social Law, resulting in different types of institutions for the care of children with disabilities, depending on the type of disability. Instead, care of children with different forms of disabilities shall be merged under the Code of Social Law of Youth and Welfare Services. Another task is to develop a coherent system regarding efficient delivery of support services. Families are to get immediate access to preventive measures. Youth Welfare Offices shall be enabled to act more flexible (e.g. to pool school escorts for children with special needs) and benefit from improved legal certainty (this could be achieved through e.g. a limitation of the required number of bidders for the provision of services). Another pillar of the planned reform consists of strengthening the system around foster families. The continuity of the foster child's social ties, taking into account the child's sense of time, shall be assured. The foster child's grown and stable social ties shall be protected. Further important aspects in this respect comprise improvements in the counseling and support for foster families (including recruitment, selection and training of foster parents) and to ensure participation and functional complaint mechanisms for the foster child. Lastly, the reform aims at strengthening the home supervisory authorities responsible for the supervision of alternative care institutions, through inter alia: further developed technical requirements for a license to operate for care institutions, improved access rights of supervisory authorities vis à vis the facilities, improved participation of young people.

Positive trends in Denmark

Denmark is reporting positive trends as fewer children are placed outside the home. In 2014 35 % fewer children and youths were placed outside the home compared to 2010. Most children and youth are placed in foster care (37 %) and this tendency has been increasing since 2010. In the same period, fewer children were placed in institutions. One explanation to these trends, are an increased focus on early intervention and prevention due to reforms of the legislation. There has also been an increased focus on using more effective and evidence based methods in family treatment to ensure that more families are provided with the right tools to ensure the development of the child. For instance, the government allocated DKK 199 million in the period 2014-2017 to initiatives that ensure early support for vulnerable children, youth and their families. As part of the implementation a bill was adopted in the Parliament that highlights the importance of early, preventive support for vulnerable children. Another initiative, was the allocation of DKK 46 million in the period of 2016-2019 to an initiative that support the municipalities to reorganize and priorities earlier preventive support for vulnerable children, youth and their families

The purpose of an earlier preventive and more effective support is to discover children who need support at an early stage and to plan an adequate intervention before the problems get too serious. The important mindsets for all initiatives are the child's right to normalization and an everyday environment. Children should not stay in institutions but live a life as 'normal' as possible with friends, school and leisure time activities, there should be a better case management through close follow-ups from social workers, greater focus on what works in relation to the child and family and how to improve it and an increased economic consciousness. Moreover, there is an increased focus on the school performances of children placed outside their homes. The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Interior is currently working closely with the Ministry of Children, Education and Gender Equality in testing various methods for improving the school performances of socially vulnerable children and youth.

Recruitment of foster families for an increasing number of children is crucial and challenging. The municipalities are responsible for the recruitment but the families are being approved by a regional unit. There is attention to that the foster families are properly trained and have access to support. The children who are now placed in foster care have often more challenges than previously and the foster families are therefore in greater need of support. The National Board of Social Services is currently testing new evidence-based education programs for foster families to ensure proper training.

Monitoring of children in institutions and foster care in Norway

The Norwegian Government presented a white paper to the Parliament in March 2016. An important goal is to create a platform on how to secure stable and good foster homes. Attention to guidance, counselling and the preparation of foster parents are part of the white paper. There is a shift in focus to more municipal responsibility aiming at strengthening the child welfare services so they can provide more viable and solid services. Placing children within the close family and network is considered as the best solution. Assistance to the biological family shall be provided before considering removal of the child from the home. As from April 1st 2016 it became compulsory for the parents to accept such assistance and measures.

Sometimes it is recommendable to place a child in an institution (as opposed to a foster home). Approximately 4 percent (900) children in alternative care live in institutions. The institutions shall be differentiated and in accordance to the children's needs; children with behavioural problems or serious emotional problems are currently placed in institutions. The County Governor's office has a responsibility in supervising twice a year whether the institution operates in accordance to the Child Welfare Act. One of the visits must be unannounced. Institutions where placement and retention is without the child's own consent shall be visited four times a year as a minimum. The supervision entails individual encounters with the children. In order to give the child an opportunity to speak freely, he or she is given the right to do so without the staff's presence.

The Child Welfare Service of the Municipality where the child originate must supervise and control the child's situation in the foster home by visiting the home minimum four times during one year. If the conditions are good, the visits can be reduced to twice a year, assuming the child has lived in the same household for more than two years. The County Governor's office will supervise the Child Welfare Service to ensure that the Service's obligations are fulfilled. In 2013 and in 2014 the County Governor's supervision covered all the Child Welfare Services in the country. In 71 out of 94 Child Welfare Services there were

either breaches of regulations and/or a need for improvements. The main problems were that foster homes were not visited four times as required, children's participation did not occur, foster parents had not received the needed advice and guidance and that the management and control by the Service was not satisfactory. The Norwegian Board of Health Supervision has the overarching responsibility in ensuring that the County Governor's offices carry out their supervision of the Child Welfare Services and that the services are justifiable and in the child's best interest.

Children in alternative care can present their complaints to the authorities and the children shall be informed of their rights and if necessary guided in how to present a complaint. Children have a right to participate in the decisions concerning their own situation. Children in alternative care have the right to bring a person of trust (by own choice) when in contact with child protection staff. Children and young people with personal experiences from the Child Welfare Services have organized themselves in different organisations to share information and advocate for improvements.

Child welfare cases that involve children with foreign citizenship or children who have strong ties to other countries may be challenging for the Child Welfare Services. A circular is recently issued in order to provide information about how the Child Welfare Service can handle these types of cases. Norway has now ratified the Hague Convention 1996 giving the country a better tool in handling transnational child welfare cases. The Central Authority will operate from July 1st 2016.

A green paper with suggestions for a new Child Welfare Act is going to be ready by November 2016. Based on the recommendations, a draft for a new Act will be presented to Parliament in 2017. Legislation regarding alternative care is part of the new proposal.

Finland with new modes of working

The aim of the new government is to strengthen the wellbeing of all children, different types of families and personal resources, by making a change towards child and family-centred services and an approach that promotes children's rights. All services for children, adolescents and families will be pooled into a set of child and family-oriented services. The focus is on preventive services and early support and care, and access to services will take place at the right time. The changes also serve to curb the rise in costs for remedial services and, over a longer term, to reduce costs.

A knowledge-based approach is to be promoted where child and family policies and services are being operated across administrative boundaries and there will be new ways in providing low-threshold child, youth and family services that work together. A child and family-centred service is designed that will operate in the municipalities and it will be offering much freedom of choice. Digitalisation, multiplex actors and partnerships with associations and parishes will also be taken into account. To nourish children's wellbeing, the government will bring more support to parenting, enhance services for divorcing families and strengthen school and early childhood education.

Institution care reorganization in Lithuania

The purpose of the Action Plan 2014 – 2020 on the Transition from Institutional Care to Family and Community Services is to identify consistent and coordinated actions promoting the development of services for disabled adults with mental and/or psychic disabilities, children and youth with mental and/or psychic disabilities, children without parental care including infants, and families as well as support for families and guardians/carers. The strategic goal of the action plan is to develop a system of integrated services which would enable every child and every disabled person, or his/her family, guardians or carers to receive individual services tailored to their needs.

In order to implement the Action Plan a state project has been developed to create conditions necessary for the establishment and development of an efficient system of transition from institutional care to family and community services in Lithuania. The project is looking into developing a methodological basis for the community services, it will carry out an evaluation of individual needs of residents of care institutions and an assessment of competences and motivation of the institutions' staff, and it will improve professional competences of staff and ensure inter-institutional, inter-departmental and inter-sectoral collaboration in the reorganization of the institutional care system.

The project will promote guardianship/care and adoption of children and the provision of social services to children without parental care, children at risk and disabled persons as well as voluntary work in these areas. The project will also work to change the values prevailing in society and local communities with respect to the reorganization of institutional care and assuring publicity and visibility of the project and its outputs.

The implementation of the measure until 2017 should draw up regional service and infrastructure development plans that each region (all the relevant regional municipalities together) to evaluate their existing services, infrastructure, and having regard to the needs of the population will examine the need for services and the need to describe the plan.

Latvia

Section 110 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Satversme) provides that the State shall provide special support to children left without parental care. For many years the most popular type of out-of-family care has been care in a guardian's family even though there is a tendency that total number of children in guardian families is decreasing. By the end of December 2015, 4 620 children were living in guardian families (63.4% of the total number of children in out-of-family care). The large majority of the guardians are the child's grandparents or other close relatives.

Data from previous years signalled a tendency of a growth in the number of children living in foster families. However, starting from 2014 a decrease or stop of growth has been identified. On 31 December 2015 there were 1 232 children living in foster families (17% of the total number of children living in out-of-family care). At the same time, from 2012 there is a convincing tendency of a yearly decrease of the number of children living in residential institutions. Nevertheless the number of children living in institutions is still higher than the number of children in foster families. By the end of December 2015, 1 429 children were living in residential institutions (20% of the total number of children living in out-of-family

care). Latvia it is not yet able to ensure a family environment (a foster family or a guardian's family) for every child left without parental care. It is the competence of the orphan's court to make an individual assessment on the need for an institutional care.

In Latvia there are 119 local governments. Each local government has at least one orphan's court that has to ensure the rights of children living in out-of-family care. Altogether there are 142 orphan's courts established by local governments. The work of the orphan's court in the field of child protection is supervised and consulted by the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights. The orphan's courts are independent local government institutions, their decisions may be appealed only in administrative court.

On 15 July 2015 the Minister of Welfare has approved action plan on the implementation of deinstitutionalization 2015 – 2020. The action plan includes the following indicators which eventually have to be met in order to accomplish the action plan:

1 760 children living in residential institutions will have assessment of their individual needs and individual support plans and 2 926 children with functional disorders living in families will have assessment of their individual needs and individual support plans. Reorganization plans will be developed for 34 local government residential institutions and 5 regional deinstitutionalization plans is to be developed. Furthermore, 3 400 children with functional disorders will receive social services financed by the European Social Fund such as social rehabilitation services, "moment of respite" services, social care services (up to the age of 5) and 654 places for children will be created or improved for child care which will ensure an environment like in a family. The number of children living in institutions will decrease by 720 (reduction by 60% of children placed in long-term care institutions longer than 3-6 months).

The year 2015 was devoted for the preparatory phase (drafting of laws, regulations, action plans etc.) in order to ensure reaching those indicators. From 1 January 2017 there will be improvements in the financial support provided for guardians and adopters. The amount of the benefit to guardian for supporting a child will be analogous to the amount of the minimum amount of child maintenance that has to be ensured by every parent for his/her child. Up to the age of seven – 25% of the minimum monthly wage (95 euros); from seven to eighteen – 30% of the minimum monthly wage (114 euros). Until 31 December 2016 the amount of the benefit to guardian for supporting a child is 45.53 euros per month. The amount of the benefit to foster family for supporting a child is already in such an amount.

The adopters to be (persons who are in the process of adoption and who have taken the child in pre-adoptive care) will receive larger remuneration for the care of a child who is going to be adopted – 171 euros per month (until 31 December 2016 - 49.80 euros a month). The minimum amount of survivor's pension/remuneration/benefit has been increased: 92.50 euros for a child up to the age of 6 years of age; 111 euros for a child from 7 to 23 years of age.

The draft law on the state budget of 2017 has been submitted to the Parliament. The approval of next year's state budget is still pending.

Tallinn Recommendations 2015 – 2020:

1. **Recognized** the importance of strengthening the work of the Council of the Baltic Sea States Expert Group on Children at Risk and the Children at Risk Unit at the CBSS Secretariat, both of which lead and support the CBSS Member States in taking responsibility for children at risk in the Baltic Sea Region, and continuing to expand professional networks and expertise;
2. **Encouraged** the Member States of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Expert Group on Children at Risk to follow-up on the Recommendations and Action Plan from the Expert Level Meeting and to prepare a meeting at Ministerial level to take stock of the progress achieved, express political commitment and support further action;
3. **Recommended** that the Expert Group on Children at Risk continues to prioritise the prevention of family separation, ensure family support and raise the quality of alternative care **with existing and foreseen funding** by:
 - a. Promoting the progressive transition from institutional to family-based and family-like care in line with the best interests of the child and quality standards of care;
 - b. Disseminating the AudTrain tool for auditing and monitoring child care facilities;
 - c. Promoting child-friendly justice and the Children's House or equivalent models of integrated services for children who are victims of violence;
 - d. Fostering cooperation at the national and transnational levels to support access to appropriate and continuous support and preventive services for children and caregivers who move within and across national borders;
 - e. Facilitating an effective implementation of laws for the prevention of violence against children - with a view to achieve a reduction and elimination of violence in practice.