

SWEDEN STUDY VISIT SUMMARY REPORT

This study visit is part of a series of study visits for experts involved in the protection and integration of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and refugees, as part of the project, “No Longer Alone: Advancing Reception Standards for Unaccompanied Children”

Youth empowerment in relation to reception conditions
Stockholm, Sweden, 25-26 November, 2015



The study visit was organized by Save the Children Sweden. The report was written by Project Manager Hanna Flood and edited by Project Coordinator Mikaela Hagan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Save the Children Sweden would like to thank Project Manager Hanna Flood for her excellent organisation of the study visit and Sigtuna Municipality for receiving the participants of the study visit and sharing their knowledge and experiences in the care of unaccompanied children. We would also like to thank Abdi Atow and Aref Karami for their organisation of the pilot project activities in Stockholm and Malmö. A special thanks to the young people, who participated at the first day of the visit and shared their views and opinions in the youth panel: Abdullahi Mohammed, Milen Eyob, Jamal Sharef and Hafez Ali and to the guardian P-O Nygren and lawyer Robert Nyström who participated in the panel on day two.

The graphic design of the report was done by Azzam Daaboul at ECRE. Special thanks are also offered to Claire Rimmer at ECRE for her valuable feedback and editing.

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PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY VISIT

Context

The visit was part of a series of study visits for European state officials, decisions makers and other experts involved in the protection and integration of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and refugees, as part of the project, “No Longer Alone: Advancing Reception Standards for Unaccompanied Children”. The project was co-funded by the European Union (DG Home affairs) and aimed to contribute to the improvement of reception standards for unaccompanied children and to ensure that when designing accommodation and reception conditions the needs of UAMs are properly taken into account. This was done through creating a space for discussion and information sharing amongst policy makers, practitioners and service providers dealing with UAMs. In order to help Member States develop and implement good reception practices, it is important to provide them with the possibility to directly exchange experience and information on the application of existing practices and concrete ways to adapt them in their national contexts.

In order to attain its objectives, the project carried out the following activities in five selected countries:

- Five case studies (France, Sweden, Netherlands, Hungary, Scotland)
- Five study visits (France, Sweden, Netherlands, Hungary, Scotland)
- Two youth participation workshops in Sweden
- A roundtable, bringing together key experts in the field of child protection, held in Belgium.

The specific aims of the case studies were to conduct an in-depth study of five reception models/practices as listed below and to underline key challenges and solutions for improvement.

- Dedicated facilities for trafficked children (Netherlands)
- Dedicated reception centre with a range of integrated services (Hungary)
- Reception and durable solutions through apprenticeship (France)
- The role of guardians in ensuring appropriate reception (Scotland)
- Youth empowerment in relation to reception conditions (Sweden)

The study visits were an important output as they targeted the main beneficiaries of the project: authorities from EU Member States and others working on the reception of unaccompanied children, both at national and at local level. In addition, the study visits were an opportunity for participants to visit specific sites and directly interact with the different stakeholders involved. The study visits involved approximately 65 Member State representatives directly.

A compendium of selected practices has been put together. It includes the case studies and the reports from the study visits as well as a toolkit on empowering children and young people to take part in policy and decision-making processes, as well as evaluate them.

The project was coordinated by ECRE, in partnership with Nidos in The Netherlands, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Save the Children Sweden, the Scottish Refugee Council in cooperation with the Scottish government, and France terre d’asile in cooperation with the Directorate for Juvenile Justice Protection of the French Ministry of Justice and the Groupement d’intérêt public ‘Justice Coopération Internationale’ (GIP JCI).

Aim of the study visit

The overall aim of the study visit was to transfer knowledge and experience on the reception system of unaccompanied children in Sweden and to exchange ideas and practices between representatives of different EU Member States. The study visit was designed to facilitate conversations and mutual learning between the visiting delegation and those who have policy and operational responsibilities and experiences working with unaccompanied children and young people and with guardians too.

In accordance with Save the Children Sweden’s role in the project a further aim was to share experiences and to inspire actors to work with youth empowerment and participation in relation to assessing and improving reception conditions. In the Swedish study visit 13 actors from 13 different countries participated.

Finally, the project originally planned to collect feedback for Swedish policy makers on how to increase youth involvement in improving the reception system in Sweden. However, many Swedish stakeholders were unavailable at the time of the visit due to the historic number of refugees and migrants who were arriving in Sweden, so instead discussions focused more generally on how to improve youth participation in all EU Member States.

Overview of the study visit

The study visit consisted of two days, 25-26 November 2015. Day 1 included the following sessions:

- Presentations of the project and the aim of the study visit
- Youth panel discussion on reception
- Presentations on the Swedish system for reception of unaccompanied children and the current situation in Sweden
- Presentations on a pilot project on participation
- Screening of films made in a youth participation project and pilot project
- Conclusions.

A short background on the Swedish context

A large proportion of children seek asylum upon arrival and Sweden is considered a destination country rather than a transit country. As of 1 January 2014, an amendment to Act (1994:137) on the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Others stipulates that all municipalities are obliged to host unaccompanied children. The Migration Agency assigns unaccompanied children to municipalities and covers the child's expenses, but the municipalities have the responsibility for their daily care and for organising housing and the reception of these children. Many of the unaccompanied children arrive in one of the bigger cities such as Stockholm or Malmö, called "reception municipalities", and a clear majority of these children apply for asylum.

Unaccompanied children may receive care from social services until they are 21 years old if they enter the care system before they turn 18. All children have the right to education and health care regardless of status. Education is organized by the municipalities. However, it is only mandatory for Swedish citizens and those with a permit to stay.

Education is not mandatory for asylum seeking children. Undocumented children do not legally have the right to preschool. Asylum seeking children have access to accommodation from the Swedish Migration Agency while unaccompanied children are provided accommodation through social services. Sometimes, depending on local practices, children and their families may receive social support even where they have no right to 'legal stay' or are undocumented.

For unaccompanied children a care plan is established by the social worker together with other actors in accordance with the BBIC tool (BBIC stands for the needs of the child in focus¹). Each child is placed in care based on an individual assessment. A best interest assessment is done by the Swedish Migration Agency during the asylum/protection procedures both for accompanied and unaccompanied children. Besides refugee status and subsidiary protection, asylum seeking children can receive a permit due to particularly distressing grounds. This ground has been removed however in newly introduced temporary asylum legislation.

In terms of co-ordination and co-operation between actors, key agencies such as the Migration Board, the National Board of Health and Welfare, and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, among others, have established their own network to discuss issues related to unaccompanied children. Other existing networks can be at the local, regional, and national levels but are often unstructured, informal, or on an ad hoc basis.

Statistics

In 2015 162 877 people applied for asylum in Sweden. Of these 70 384 were children and of these 35 365 were unaccompanied. The main country of origin for accompanied children was Syria and for unaccompanied children Afghanistan. The majority of the unaccompanied children were boys. 2847 unaccompanied children were girls. In 2015 the general recognition rate, excluding Dublin and others, was 77 percent. Including Dublin and others 55 %. For unaccompanied children the rates were 88 percent and 66 percent. The average handling time for the case of an unaccompanied child in 2015 was 195 days.

1. Barns Behov i Centrum (Swedish: Children's Needs at the Centre; Sweden)

There are a large number of children living in Sweden without legal permission: children in hiding and undocumented children. Statistical estimations from 2010 suggest that 2 000-3 000 children are living in hiding. There are no recent reliable data on the number of undocumented children/children without the right to 'legal stay' including children of EU-citizens, children in transit, children who do not seek asylum, child victims of trafficking and children with a rejected asylum application.

The Swedish pilot project on the participation of unaccompanied children – a few promising examples

The CONNECT report on Sweden² pointed out **that the direct participation of unaccompanied children in policy making rarely takes place**. This is therefore an important area of improvement for national authorities to make sure that policies and responses are effective and based on the actual needs of the children and young people who are the target group.

In this we project we have explored a couple of methods that we believe enhance participation. One of them is outlined below:

Meeting Places with unaccompanied children

"To have a child perspective, a child's perspective or a child rights perspective in your work or your private life is all but impossible if you don't start by listening to the child. You don't need to arrange a conference to do that, but it is a worthy and exciting alternative." In our view the final words of the introduction to the report on *Meeting Place Värmland 2014 – voices from a conference for unaccompanied children* grasp the essence of participation.

Over the years, Save the Children Sweden have conducted Meeting Places in the municipalities of Göteborg, Karlstad and Umeå/Vännäs. The target groups were children that were either seeking asylum, had a permanent residence permit or had had their applications for asylum or a permit rejected.

Even though the conferences were organized by volunteers and others, the agenda was to a substantial extent outlined by the participants. Topics stretched from experiences of being newly arrived to conclusions on what is required for improving reception conditions according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, section 12.

The principal aim was to create a setting where the participants felt not only recognized but also played an active role in terms of planning and implementation. More specifically, the purpose was to:

- provide an enjoyable way of getting together for children who share a life story
- offer an understanding of their universally acknowledged human rights
- make them feel distinguished and appreciated
- document their views and thoughts of the future

The participants made use of various techniques to express their views. Some published blog statements directed to politicians, others made drawings and collages of their experiences, feelings and thoughts. Reoccurring keywords were security, family, friends, chief guardianship, housing, leisure activities, language, and job opportunities.

We wanted to develop this further in terms of empowerment of the unaccompanied children involved in the process. How can we take participation to next level in terms of influencing political, economic and social structures that goes beyond everyday matters?

2. For more info see www.connectproject.eu



DAY 1: ROUNDTABLE ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SWEDEN, 25 NOVEMBER 2015

The speakers on day one were Project Coordinator/Children on the Move Advisor Mikaela Hagan, Project Manager Hanna Flood, Pilot Project Manager Abdullahi Mohammed, Sandra Akiwumi Lundstedt, who also participated in the pilot project and finally Milen Eyob, Jamal Sharef and Hafez Ali, who participated in the youth panel.

Government proposes measures to create respite for Swedish refugee reception

- In the last two months alone, 80 000 people have sought asylum in Sweden
- Of these, there are so many children and young people that it is equivalent to more than 100 new school classes each week
- Municipalities are reporting themselves for irregularities (Lex Sarah reports) since they can no longer manage reception in a secure manner
- Sweden can no longer guarantee a roof over the head of those who make their way to our country and in the last week people have had to sleep outdoors
- The Government therefore wants to temporarily adjust the asylum regulations to the minimum level in the EU so that more people choose to seek asylum in other EU countries

The Swedish legislation will be temporarily brought into line with the minimum requirements in international conventions and EU law

- Temporary residence permits for all persons in need of protection except quota refugees
- Limited right to family member immigration for persons in need of protection with temporary residence permits
- Tougher maintenance requirements to support those arriving (only for refugees in the three first months)
- Persons otherwise in need of protection will not be entitled to a residence permit.
- The provision of residence permits on the grounds of exceptionally/particularly distressing circumstances will be replaced by a provision allowing a residence permit to be granted on humanitarian grounds in certain very limited exceptional cases (18.4 % of the current UAC case load)
- There will not be any special provision for residence permits for children
- The Government wants to introduce the medical age determination of asylum seekers
- Sweden will soon introduce ID checks on all modes of public transport to Sweden

Current situation

- It is difficult to accommodate and find placements for all children
- The registration procedures are slow
- Children are disappearing, especially from arrival municipalities
- Shortage of guardians
- New staff is being recruited in a speedy manner
- Lack of quality of assessments of foster and kinship care placement
- Security issues and fires in care facilities
- Less possibility to screen for victims of human trafficking

Youth Panel

A youth panel on reception was held consisting of four young people (Milen Eyob, Abdullahi Mohammed, Jamal Sharef and Hafez Ali) all with their own experience of coming to Sweden as unaccompanied children. The following topics were discussed: the young people's own experiences of care facilities, guardians and reception in Sweden; Influence and participation in the reception process in regards to care facilities, guardians, school and society in general; Challenges according to the young people's own experiences, their thoughts and ideas for improvement and what they consider key factors for good reception; Ideas and thoughts related to strengthening youth participation in the reception process.

Swedish system

The third point on the agenda was a two-part presentation of the Swedish system for the reception of unaccompanied children and the current situation in Sweden by Mikaela Hagan, Thematic Advisor Children on the Move from Save the Children Sweden. An overview was given on the actors involved in the reception system and Swedish law. The presentation also included Save the Children's and other relevant actors' work related to reception and youth participation.

Swedish actors

- Legal guardians
- Social workers
- Reception centre staff
- Public counsel
- Migration Agency case workers
- Health care staff
- School

Pilot Project on Participation

The two youth participation workshops arranged within the project No Longer Alone were presented. The facilitators of the respective workshops presented the results of the project and the methods used: A Meeting Place in Stockholm and a Digital Storytelling workshop in Malmö. The presentation included the aim, setup, result and reflections on the respective workshops and a screening of a short film made in the youth participation workshop on Digital Storytelling. After this presentation another film was screened made by young people in a previous youth empowerment project for unaccompanied minors within Save the Children Sweden.

What is a Meeting Place?

- A method for youth participation
- The aim is to recognize and listen to the experiences of unaccompanied **children**

Implementation

- 22 young people participated
- Introduction and discussions focusing on four different themes
- An over-riding theme of involvement/influence and participation
- An evaluation of the participants' experience of the day
- Entertainment/culture

Topics that were discussed during the workshop and presented during the study visit:

Living situation

- The size of the care facilities
- Staff
- An appointed contact person

Guardianship

- Experiences varies alot
- "The guardian should assist in focusing on the future."
- "The guardian should not be assigned to too many young people at the same time."

School/education

- Encouragement from teachers is important
- Classes should be adjusted according to the levels of the students
- Worry and stress over the asylum process makes it difficult to concentrate and focus

The Future

- Education is believed to be an important factor in achieving goals
- Worry over the asylum process and/or family members makes it difficult to focus on the future
- Worry about the end of support at a certain age (e.g. termination of the guardian at the age of 18).
- The need for more information on rights and obligations linked to turning 18 and 21



DAY 2: FIELD VISIT IN SIGTUNA, 26 NOVEMBER 2015

Field trip to the municipality of Sigtuna

- Presentation at the unit for unaccompanied children
- Visit to a transit facility for unaccompanied children
- Panel discussion with actors involved in the reception system, a lawyer and a guardian

Field trip to the municipality of Sigtuna

The first part of day two consisted of a field visit to the municipality of Sigtuna where we visited the Unit for Unaccompanied Children at social services. A presentation was given by representatives from the unit on their work, the unit in relation to other authorities, responsibilities of municipalities and social services in Sweden and the system for accommodation and social care for unaccompanied children in a municipality. After this presentation a visit was made to a transit facility for unaccompanied children in the municipality of Sigtuna where the participants were given a tour and a presentation of transit accommodation and the work in this specific care facility.

Panel discussion

The second part of day two consisted of a panel discussion with a representative from the Association for Guardians and Caregivers and a lawyer specialized in representing unaccompanied children. The panel participants presented their respective field of work followed by a discussion on experiences, challenges in the field, good practice and the current situation. One of the questions discussed was the benefits of having a semi-professional guardianship system and whether it would be better to professionalize the guardians.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants highlighted discussions and the possibility to exchange experiences between countries as being very positive.

The participation of young people in the panel who all had their own experience of coming to Sweden as unaccompanied children contributed to a perspective much appreciated by the participants, as shown in the evaluation forms as well as in their communication with us as organisers. The young people stayed during the whole of the first day, participated in discussions and answered questions from the participants. This resulted in a wider perspective on the issue of reception and contributed to the transfer of knowledge and experiences. As shown in the evaluation forms and communicated during the study visit one of the key aspects taken on board by the participants to apply and increase in their own Member States was youth participation. Another aspect that inspired and was of interest to many to apply was the model of guardianship for unaccompanied children. For participants from Member States who receive a low number of unaccompanied children at the moment, but are expecting an increase such as Estonia, Slovakia and Iceland, the system of reception as a whole was inspiring and the participants highlighted different aspects that will be useful for their work on advancing reception standards. This was also of interest for Malta which is becoming more of a country of destination.

We managed to transfer knowledge both on the system of reception and the actors involved, this included the reception system and good practice before the latest proposals by the Swedish government and the current status of uncertainty due to shifts in the Swedish reception system. For the latter we presented and discussed the important factors regarding the rights of unaccompanied children in relation to the current situation and the challenges it may involve. Discussions were held on challenges for the future for unaccompanied children as asylum seekers and from a perspective of the rights of the child. Apart from presentations by actors from municipalities the panel discussion included a representative from the association of guardians and caregivers and a lawyer specialized in representing unaccompanied children and these perspectives contributed to the overall picture of the actors involved.

Listed as most useful/interesting was the field visit to the municipality of Sigtuna, the youth panel during day one, the panel discussion during day two, the presentations of the youth participation workshops and the presentation of the Swedish system of reception. Discussions on guardianship, age assessment and the current situation in Sweden were also considered useful/interesting.

The participants listed the exchange between countries as inspiring and beneficial. New ideas gained included youth participation aspects such as including unaccompanied children in discussions and to increase and strengthen youth participation, the youth participation workshops and films, new ideas related to guardianship and the roles of different actors involved in the reception of unaccompanied children, inspiration from social services in the municipality of Sigtuna, new ideas on how to arrange conferences from the setup of this study visit, the importance of information in order to strengthen youth influence and the right to participate. The participants expressed a desire to transfer the knowledge and experience gained to their respective colleagues/unit.

ANNEX 1 - AGENDA

Study visit in Stockholm, Sweden 25-26 November 2015

Day 1 Wednesday 25 November

- 09.00 – 09.15am Registration of participants
- 09.15 – 10.00am Welcome
Mikaela Hagan, Thematic Advisor Children on the Move SCS
Hanna Flood, Project Coordinator No Longer Alone SCS
Screening of a movie made in youth empowerment project
- 10.00 – 11.00am Youth panel on reception
- 11.00 – 11.15am Coffee break
- 11.15 – 12.00am Background Swedish system
- 12.00 – 13.00pm Lunch
- 13.00 – 14.00pm The rights of the child and key findings from the Swedish case study
Mikaela Hagan, Thematic Advisor Children on the Move SCS
- 14.00 – 15.00pm Presentation of pilot projects on participation
Abdullahi Addow, Facilitator youth participation workshop
Sandra Akiwumi-Lundstedt, Operational Developer SCS
Hanna Flood, Project Coordinator No Longer Alone SCS
- 15.00 – 15.15pm Coffee break
- 15.15 – 16.30pm Workshop on participation, challenges and opportunities
- 16.30 – 17.00pm Conclusions
- 19.00 Dinner

Day 2 Thursday 26 November

- 8.00 – 12.00am Field trip to the municipality of Sigtuna
Presentation of the Unit for Unaccompanied Refugee Children
Visit to a care facility for unaccompanied children.
- 12.00 – 13.00pm Lunch
- 13.00 – 14.00pm Panel discussion: Presentations by panel participants
P-O Nygren, Association for guardians and caregivers
Robert Nyström, Lawyer specialized in unaccompanied minors
- 14.00 – 14.30pm Coffee break
- 14.30 – 15.30pm Panel discussion
- 15.30 – 16.00pm Conclusions

ANNEX 2 - LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

The study visit hosted a total of thirteen participants including twelve external participants and one partner participant. The goal was thirteen external participants and two participating partners. The participants represented the following countries: Romania, Belgium, Ireland, Poland, France (2 participants; one external and one partner), Hungary, Greece, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Estonia, Iceland, and Malta.

List of participants

- Gheorghe Sofian, The Regional Centre for Accommodation and Procedures for Asylum Seekers, Romania.
- Abdel El Abbassi, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, Belgium.
- Mary Kenny, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland.
- Agata Jaształ, the Ombudsman for Children's Office, Poland
- Damien Cuvillier, the Ministry of Justice, France.
- Zsófia Roszik, Head of the Children's Home for Unaccompanied Minors, Károlyi István Child Centre, Hungary.
- Vasiliki Tea, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Greece
- Simona Majernikova, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Slovakia
- Johan van der Have, the Central Organization for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, the Netherlands.
- Clara Mallet, France terre d'asile, France.
- Margit Sarv, the Children's Rights Department, Estonia.
- Guðríður Bolladóttir, the Ministry of Welfare, Iceland.
- Nadia Toutoungi, the Agency of Welfare of Asylum Seekers, Malta.



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