



Cities for Active Inclusion



The active inclusion of young people: Sofia

**EUROCITIES NETWORK
OF LOCAL AUTHORITY
OBSERVATORIES ON
ACTIVE INCLUSION**

CITIES FOR ACTIVE INCLUSION

The EUROCIITIES Network of Local Authority Observatories on Active Inclusion (EUROCITIES-NLAO) is a dynamic network of nine European cities - Birmingham, Bologna, Brno, Copenhagen, Krakow, Lille Métropole - Roubaix, Rotterdam, Sofia and Stockholm - each with a local authority observatory (LAO) within its administration.

Their aim is to share information, promote mutual learning and carry out research on the implementation of active inclusion strategies at the local level. The nine observatories are coordinated by EUROCIITIES, the network of major cities in Europe, and supported through a partnership with the European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion).

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1. Introduction

1.1 National context

Bulgaria has a population of 7.4 million people. Young people in Bulgaria are living in the dynamic times of major socio-economic change: partly due to the global financial crisis, and partly due to political change. This poses significant challenges for young people in Bulgaria. To succeed, they require skills for increased adaptability and opportunities for personal development. In terms of ensuring the active inclusion of all young people, Bulgaria is focusing on two key groups: on the one hand, young people in general; and on the other, the specific group of young people, some of them with disabilities, who are leaving Bulgaria's state run institutions for children.

In Bulgaria, twenty years after the major political changes, there are still a large number of residential institutions caring for children and young people¹. These institutions vary depending on the age of the children and their specific problems. However, all these institutions have significant disadvantages over family style care. They may be able to meet the children's basic physiological needs, such as shelter, food, healthcare and education. But they do not guarantee to meet other needs such as encouraging self-confidence, identity building, using a personal approach, independence, or skills for emotional closeness. The process of deinstitutionalisation is continuing in Bulgaria, but unfortunately the new alternative forms of support are currently insufficient².

As part of the deinstitutionalisation process, the state actively supports young people by creating educational, training and development opportunities. These are designed to help them capitalise on their creative and professional potential. Bulgaria's Ministry for Labour and Social Policy has primary responsibility for this, working in collaboration with its two national agencies: the Social Assistance Agency and the Employment Agency.

The Social Assistance Agency

This executive agency is directly responsible for the reform of residential care for children and young people and for people with disabilities, and supports the development of alternative social services. There is a Regional Directorate for Social Assistance in Sofia, as well as nine Local Directorates for Social Assistance. These are responsible providing direct services to different areas of the city and cover all 24 city districts. The responsibilities of the Social Assistance Agency and its regional and local directorates include:

- child protection;
- local rehabilitation and social integration services for disabled people;
- providing financial assistance to people in need;
- social services;
- specialist residential accommodation.

¹ In Sofia there are 2 Children's Homes for children from 3 to 18 with and 1 Social Vocational Training Centre for young people from 16 to 22 with a total capacity of 190 children and young people.

² Deinstitutionalisation is the process of replacing institutional care for children by care in a family or in an environment similar to a family. This process also helps prevent the placement of children in institutions, by creating new opportunities for children and families to receive support in the community. Currently, alternative forms of care are inadequate for the number of children who are leaving the institutions.



The Employment Agency

This agency implements the state policy for promoting employment. Giving employment to a person enables them to make full use of their individual opportunities and abilities, and protects their rights to a decent living and full participation in society. For Sofia, the Employment Agency has a regional department and four local Employment Bureaus. These are involved in planning and implementing employment programmes for the city, and the active integration into the labour market of young people at risk.

Young people at risk include:

- young people with disabilities;
- young people leaving institutions;
- young people who have dropped out from school;
- unemployed young people, particularly those from socially excluded communities, such as those with a Roma background.

The main responsibilities of the Employment Bureaus are to:

- provide vocational guidance to young people;
- provide training in how best to find a job;
- mediate between employers and vulnerable unemployed young people;
- help develop regional and local employment programmes;
- help train vulnerable groups of young people.

1.2 City context

Sofia is the capital of Bulgaria and has some 2 million inhabitants. In Sofia, the municipality's role is vital for the development of active inclusion policies and for services provision. The municipality develops and implements annual action plans and integrated policies for young people at risk, by integrating the necessary resources, and by coordinating activities in the fields of social welfare, education, health, and the labour market. These policies and activities are led by the interests and needs of young people at risk.

Local authorities have specific responsibilities in initiating and implementing various measures for the social inclusion of young people. For example, local authorities coordinate and initiate the development of programmes for improving the quality of education and for the prevention of risky behaviours. They also develop local centres that have a combined educational and social role: these are designed to support drop-out prevention, and encourage children and young people to continue their schooling.

Sofia Municipality also provides various social services to support young people leaving institutions. In addition, the city arranges the annual monitoring and evaluation of social services, and assesses the needs of groups at risk.



1.3 Funding

In Bulgaria there is no special fund for the active inclusion of young people, not even for young people leaving the state institutions. However, currently the state and the local authorities are both directly involved in the process of deinstitutionalisation. In 2010 the government adopted a national strategy called: Vision for the Deinstitutionalisation of Children in Bulgaria. This focuses on three key aspects:

- the provision of new social services that will support children who are leaving institutions;
- mechanisms to ensure these social services are sustained;
- systems to maximise the efficient use of resources.

The overall objective is to allow the closure of the state institutions by 2015.

Currently in Bulgaria there are various national programmes for the social inclusion of young people, as well as various schemes under the European Social Fund's Human Resources Development operational programme. Under this ESF programme, two special schemes have been set up:

- For a better future for our children.
- Not abandoning a single child: this scheme started in June 2010 and aims to help deinstitutionalise children and young people leaving institutions, and ensure active inclusion for them all.

1.4 Policy integration

In Sofia, integration between different policy areas such as education, training, health and employment is based on cooperation between different stakeholders. Young people leaving institutions often have disabilities and are strongly dependent on care. They have no relatives to rely on and need support in every sphere. The local units of the national Social Assistance Agency and the national Employment Agency cooperate closely, by providing initial information about labour market opportunities and local inclusion programmes for young people, as well as training, retraining and initial social assistance. These services are developed in response to local needs, for example by setting up committees and joint working groups to assess the requirements of young people with disabilities. The working groups include specialists from various departments of both agencies.

In terms of accommodation, the municipality itself is responsible for housing. In terms of health, the health care system in Bulgaria is very well developed, with pre-hospital care and hospitals providing services across the whole country. Bulgaria has implemented the social model of health insurance, which means that everyone pays according to their income and receives medical care according to their needs. In 1998, Bulgaria's Health Insurance Act introduced compulsory health insurance and resulted in the National Health Insurance Fund being set up: this provides and guarantees free and equal access to medical care for all insured people.

Effective partnerships and inter-departmental cooperation contributes to the establishment of an optimal network of social services in Sofia, which ensures equal access to services for young people.



1.5 Unemployment

According to the latest monthly data, in Sofia 16.3% of registered unemployed people are under 29 years old. This is two percentage points below the national average. Sofia is characterised by a highly qualified adult population. Only 17.3% of unemployed people just have a primary or lower education and no qualifications. Although this figure of 17.3% is relatively low compared with the national average of 50% unemployed people having low educational achievements, it is still cause for concern, as it includes young people who have recently moved out of Bulgaria's institutions: although they have had a secondary education, many of these young people have poor skills and knowledge.

Figures show that 34% of young people with only a primary education are unemployed in Bulgaria, and 25% of young people with only a secondary education are unemployed. In addition, 20% of those young people who are employed are working in jobs that are not related to their qualifications.

Unemployment in Bulgaria is rising to high levels and is becoming one of the main problems for society. Particularly affected are the groups of people at risk. Young people form one of the major groups of unemployed on the labour market in Sofia. There are four main reasons: the education system does not correspond to labour market needs; there are difficulties in initially finding and starting work; the payment levels are low; and the significant migration of young people from smaller towns into Sofia.

2. Policy and practices for the active inclusion of young people

2.1 National Youth Strategy and Regional Social Services Strategy

In 2010 the Council of Ministers adopted a National Youth Strategy 2010-2020, focusing on young people aged 15 to 29. The general objectives of the strategy are to reduce the number of dropouts from the educational system and to increase the percentage of graduates. Another aim is to improve the career development of young people, including the career development for young state employees: civil servants. The new strategy provides a tool for capitalising on young people's creative talents and skills and for encouraging young people to participate more actively in society.

At the regional level, there is a Strategy for the Development of Social Services in Sofia 2011-2015. This identifies measures for resolving the issue of children and young people who have been living in institutions in Sofia. According to the Strategy, by 2014-2015, the Sofia Municipality plans to establish alternative support services for young people leaving institutions. These include homes, transitional housing, and supervised housing. To date, the city of Sofia has two public-sector supervised homes, and in the Sofia region there are an additional four supervised homes. These are co-financed by the state and the municipality.



Young people leaving social institutions face the difficult task of coping with the challenges of independent life, and in many cases young people struggle to make a smooth transition to independent living. Unprepared for this step, many of them face the realities of life on the street. One of the main priorities of Sofia Municipality is therefore to create equal opportunities for social change and for the inclusion of disadvantaged young people, through a smooth transition process to independent living. This will be achieved by creating new, alternative services, including supervised housing for all young people leaving orphanages, throughout the country. Supervised housing provides social service support and counselling, for young people over 18 who leave institutional care. By setting up a various alternative transitional housing options, supported by a team of specialists, the city can help institutionalised young people to become independent.

2.2 Active inclusion of young people with multiple disadvantages

Practices for supporting the active inclusion of people with multiple disadvantages in the city are organised on the one hand, by the Agency for People with Disabilities and the Employment Agency, and on the other hand by Sofia Municipality.

The Agency for People with Disabilities provides funding for ensuring access to the workplace as well as adaptations inside the workplace.

The Employment Agency has developed the following initiatives for the active inclusion of disadvantaged young people:

National initiative to encourage employers to hire vulnerable young people up to 29 years old

This encourages employers to provide jobs to various groups of young people: those with disabilities; those who were in the armed forces; and those from state institutions who have completed their education. In return, employers receive funds from the state budget to pay their wages, for up to 6 months.

National programme for employment and vocational training of people with disabilities

This programme encourages employers to provide jobs and work-based training to unemployed young people with permanent disabilities. In return, employers receive funds to pay their wages for up to 36 months, including holiday pay to cover basic annual leave.

2.3 The role of social services

From the analysis of the existing social services in Sofia, it is clear that relatively few of the current services have been designed to prevent social exclusion. The majority of social services, such as institutions, residential homes and day care centres, are aimed at users with complex needs, including young people leaving institutions. These measures for social inclusion are focused mainly on rehabilitation and reintegration, rather than on the preventing the causes of social exclusion. Overall, in Sofia, early intervention services aimed at preventing social exclusion are still inadequate.



In January 2011, Sofia Municipality set out the city's Strategy for Prevention of Social Exclusion 2011-2015. The strategy document details the following aspects:

- a vision for the future;
- strategic and specific objectives for the future;
- expected results;
- the actions to be taken to prevent social exclusion.

A substantial part of the strategy covers the formulation of long-term strategic and related goals, the implementation of which will overcome the effects of poverty and social exclusion. The term social exclusion is relatively new. Almost unknown twenty years ago, it is now the focus of European policies to tackle inequality, poverty and disadvantage. The main indicators that are used to measure social exclusion in Sofia are: income, unemployment, health, access to health services, access to education, participation in community life, satisfaction and general happiness.

As in Bulgaria generally, in Sofia the social inclusion of young people is directly dependent on social services. Many young people leaving institutions fall into social isolation. They become known to the authorities in direct relation to their need for social services and the provision of social services to them. They may then receive help, for example, with protected homes, or training courses to cope with various life situations, or vocational training or work placements.

2.4 Effective cooperation between stakeholders

Over the past few years Sofia Municipality has been establishing new relationships and partnerships with European and national institutions, as well as with third sector and private sector organisations, to achieve more effective inclusion of young people.

In 2010 Sofia Municipality established a Public Council for Social Policy. This is a public advisory body which aims to raise the quality of social services provision. It involves representatives from all the relevant stakeholders, as follows:

- Agency for people with Disabilities;
- Regional Directorate for Social Assistance;
- National Centre for Social Rehabilitation;
- Union of Visually Impaired People in Bulgaria, which also represents the Union of Disabled People in Bulgaria and the Union of Deaf People in Bulgaria;
- Foundation of International Social Services Bulgaria;
- other NGOs.

Effective cooperation among the different stakeholders allows the formation and implementation of shared policies for active inclusion, and stimulates the development of good practices for innovative services.



The participation of NGOs in the active inclusion activities in the city is of the utmost importance in Sofia, as well as in other Bulgarian municipalities. NGO's can help to develop and implement policies that more effectively include young people and that actively promote informal social support networks. In addition, NGOs and other third sector organisations usually work close to where people live, and are therefore more aware of their needs and problems. The same can be said for informal social networks such as networks of neighbours, friends, and church communities, whose resources currently remain under-used.

The following examples show what is being achieved through cooperation between businesses and NGOs in Sofia:

Mobile work with street children

Since the beginning of 2011, three organisations have been working in partnership on this project: the Sofia Directorate of the Interior and its district offices; the Agency for Social Assistance; and Sofia Municipality. The Mobile work with street children project aims to increase the effectiveness of active inclusion work with individual street children and young people, and to set up an effective network for mobile computing.

Protected Home TOGETHER

In 2006, representatives of the not-for-profit Bulgarian Mothers Movement and Sofia's Architectural & Design Agency Ltd (A.D.A. Ltd.), worked together to create a charity project called: Protected Home TOGETHER. The main purpose of the Protected Home TOGETHER project is to provide effective support for young people who are leaving an orphanage or other institution. The project built a protected home in 2008 on the outskirts of Sofia. Young people aged 18 years old can stay there for a year, during which time they are provided with professional and social skills training. The home has ten individual rooms for young people to live in, a lecture room and computer room, and an apartment for the family taking care of the young people. Each year, the project provides accommodation and services to 10 young people and also helps those who have already left the protected home. Funding is through donations, and the charity continuously raises funds to support the initiative through promotional activity in the media and through presentations.



3. The main challenges for the active inclusion of young people

3.1 Deinstitutionalisation

As explained throughout the previous sections, one of the main challenges for the active inclusion of young people in Sofia, and in general in Bulgaria, is the need to strengthen the process of deinstitutionalisation. The city needs to reduce the number of institutions and provide adequate alternative services to support and empower young people leaving these institutions. There are significant challenges for young people leaving the care system: they need support to live an independent life, find suitable jobs, reach a higher level of education, live in stable housing conditions and avoid criminal behaviour.

The state regulations require municipalities to include young people within society and address their problems in a multi-sectoral way. The current funding is mainly from the state budget and from various European programmes. New active inclusion activities are mainly only possible through EU project funding and EU operational programmes.

However, Bulgaria is taking steps to restructure its social services, the primary goal being to improve the welfare of children and young people. The institutions and community based services are funded by the state budget, regardless of whether the services are being managed by the municipality or by NGOs. Currently, no actual reduction of the budget has been announced, but downsizing the capacity of some institutions will naturally result in a proportional reduction in costs.

This restructuring of Bulgaria's social services, including the services in Sofia, is a long and complicated process. It will substantially change the organisation and delivery of services that address the needs of children. The implication is that an entirely new methodology will be created for each new service, together with an individualised approach for each child. At the moment, the restructuring of Bulgaria's social services is progressing relatively slowly due to insufficient funding.

In terms of provision for homeless people, currently, Sofia has three centres that provide temporary accommodation for homeless people: one of them is for young people who are orphans, aged 16-25 years old. But the total capacity offered by these three centres is grossly inadequate. Not only are there significant numbers of homeless young people leaving Sofia's institutions, there is also an ever-increasing flow of migrants into the city, some of whom are also young people. One of the serious challenges faced by Sofia is the large number of migrants coming to the city to seek shelter and work. This is an additional reason for the lack of vacancies in social housing and in temporary accommodation centres, and is also one of the reasons why there is not enough municipal housing.



3.2 Youth unemployment

Youth unemployment has increased in Sofia. According to the national Employment Agency, the number of unemployed young people registered at Sofia's employment bureaus increased during 2009 and then increased further in the first nine months of 2010. This growth in youth unemployment indicates the significant negative impact of the current economic crisis. From January 2010 to September 2010, the number of unemployed young people grew by 15,871 (32.7%) to a total of 64,463. However, unemployed young people as a proportion of total unemployed people remains almost unchanged at 18.1% (compared with 18.2% in 2009).

In terms of the educational level of unemployed young people, in 2010, 50.5% of unemployed young people had a primary or lower educational level, while 26.0% had received special secondary education and/or vocational education (23.4% in 2009); and 14.4% had a general secondary education (13.3% in 2009). In the third quarter of 2010, 9.2% unemployed young people had a university education, and that same quarter shows a monthly average of 13,928 young people had been unemployed long-term (4,676 more than the previous quarter). This indicates that 21.6% of all unemployed young people have been out of work long-term (19.0% in 2009.)

High youth unemployment is a serious challenge for Bulgaria, and specifically in Sofia, because it is related to so many other issues, including:

- demand for changes in labour market activities to provide additional and innovative ways to overcome youth unemployment: public sector organisations are required to invest extra resources in developing and creating new labour market activities and opportunities for young people to move into employment, including national programmes and other schemes.
- possible social and political change;
- significant migration into the cities by young people looking for work, which decreases the number of young people living in small towns: this in turn leads to a lack of development opportunities in these towns;
- the possible need for changes to the educational system, as unemployment may be a result of inadequate education.

4. Good lessons

4.1. Knyaz Boris I Centre for Social and Professional Training

This centre is a municipal complex offering vocational training for young people aged 16 to 22 years old who have a mental disability. The centre is co-financed by the state and the municipality. The service capacity is 50 young people, and each training course lasts for three years. Over this three year training period, young people without a family are provided with residential care, while those with families either attend on a daily basis or live in during the weekdays. The service offers vocational training in seven professions: womenswear tailoring, menswear tailoring, cleaning



services, catering, bricklaying, construction, and painting and decorating. Young people choose their occupations depending on their health and capabilities. The service is staffed by highly qualified people, and including: social workers, social teachers, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists and professional teachers.

Besides being trained in a profession, students work with social workers and teachers on various situations that they will inevitably face in real life. So, within the educational programme the students are trained in Social and Living Skills, such as:

- how to rent a place to live;
- applying for a job;
- general behaviour;
- planning and budgeting personal finances;
- shopping e.g. food, clothes, household goods, appliances, books etc;
- household maintenance;
- behaviour in public.

Social workers and social educators also provide students with social support, and liaise with other services to resolve any problems that occur.

Young people with disabilities suffer from multiple disadvantages: their inclusion into the labour market is more difficult compared to young people without disabilities. Their professional development in the first year after leaving a residential and/or training scheme often progresses slowly. Some of them have poor communication skills; some are unable to assess different life situations; and often their self-esteem is poor.

In order to deal with this, during the last year of their training, they are given an internship in a work environment, so that they learn how to work in a team. Approximately 80% of graduates are offered permanent employment during the internship. The types of jobs available depend on the profession chosen by the young person while at the Knyaz Boris I centre: womenswear tailoring, menswear tailoring, cleaning services, catering, bricklaying, construction, or painting and decorating. For example, in 2010, two young people started working for the cleaning services team at the municipal hospitals; one young person started working for a sewing company; and two started working for the Sofia Airport catering company.

4.2 Dolphins: transitional housing scheme

In 2009, in order to smooth the transition from institutional life to independent life, Sofia Municipality has established a new transitional housing scheme.

The Dolphins transitional housing scheme is an alternative form of social service, provided within the Knyaz Boris I Social Professional Training Centre described in Section 4.1 above. This housing scheme is based on the model of life in a small group, and has room for eight young people, all of whom have mental disabilities. These young people live at Dolphins during the last part of their professional training at the Knyaz Boris I centre.



The main objectives of the Dolphin housing scheme are to:

- build and maintain a social environment that closely resembles a family, in which the young people live independently, as part of society;
- provide support, assistance and effective training for young people, leading to development of social skills and work habits;
- assist with finding employment after completing the professional training;
- ensure inclusion in training programmes;
- liaise with employers;
- provide care, through networking with the state and the municipality, social institutions, private companies, NGOs and other organisations.

4.3 Career Day

For the past several years in Sofia, an annual Career Day has been hosted, for people with disabilities. Its main goal is to improve the opportunities for disabled people to start working and to forge a successful career. Part of the aim is to ensure young disabled people have direct contact with employers. This initiative helps to reduce unemployment and social exclusion among young people with disabilities. The Career Day is organised by the Bulgarian Association for Personal Alternatives NGO, in close cooperation with Sofia Municipality and the Agency for Disabled People.

5. FUTURE PLANS FOR PROMOTING THE ACTIVE INCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Future plans for the active inclusion of young people in Bulgaria and in Sofia are set out in Bulgaria's recent draft National Reform Programme.

The high unemployment and the low economic activity of young people are among the main challenges for the active inclusion of young people in Sofia, as in Bulgaria as a whole. In order to increase the employability of young people and to improve their access to the labour market, a new set of measures will be implemented under the National Reform Programme. These new measures will enhance their knowledge and skills in line with labour market needs; and will facilitate the transition from education to employment, through work trials, apprenticeships, initial employment support, and opportunities for combining education and employment. Support will also be offered to create opportunities for young people to start their own independent business activities.

A priority is that by 2013, there will be a smooth transition from education to employment, through a New Start programme for young people, in the form of training and employment



activities. This will be offered to them within four months of their registration as unemployed.

In general, the main priorities for Bulgaria's labour market policy and for actively including young people are:

- **Participation:** to increase the participation of young people in the labour market and shorten the period that they are unemployed: a key initial aim is to provide the New Start programme to 20% of unemployed young people;
- **Flexicurity:** to improve the flexibility of the labour market at the same time as ensuring security for those employed, for example, through active inclusion initiatives by social enterprise partners;
- **Long-term unemployed:** to activate long-term unemployed people and inactive people, and integrate vulnerable groups into the labour market, including older people, for example, by providing the New Start programme to 30% of unemployed people;
- **Efficiency:** to provide efficient employment services to ensure a quick transition from unemployment to employment;
- **Demand and supply:** to improving the match between labour demand and supply;
- **Life-long learning:** to increase the knowledge and skills of the labour force, including young people, through life-long learning activities.



ANNEX 1. References

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