

ESN BRINGS TOGETHER SOCIAL SERVICES IN EUROPE

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The European Social Network (ESN) enables local public social services in Europe to share best practices. The ESN recently arranged a workshop that addressed how social services can work across sectors to facilitate the inclusion of young people with mental health problems, young people leaving care, and young people with a refugee background. As a member of the ESN, The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues presented the project “Youth in the Nordic Countries”.

THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL NETWORK (ESN)

The European Social Network (ESN) is the primary network for local public social services in Europe. The ESN enables its members to come together to improve the quality of the services they provide. The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues is one of over a hundred ESN member organizations in 34 countries. John Halloran is the ESN’s Chief Executive:

– Today in Europe, young people face a number of challenges, and society and our services need to address these problems. Practically, we need an approach that listens to young people and seeks to understand their particular needs and recognises that many of them feel alienated. We (local public services) need to build support for them as close as possible to where they live and grow up.

Halloran continues describing the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation to support young persons who are at risk of marginalization:

– The increase in poor mental health among young people is acknowledged by many of our members who have identified the importance of

working with other agencies, including education, employment, housing, health, and social services to see how we can help young people to develop their skills and resilience to improve their chances of leading a good life.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The ESN believes that social services must protect and support vulnerable people, uphold their dignity and independence, listen to service users, and promote solidarity between people and their communities. Halloran gives a European example of a best practice that focuses on cross-sectoral cooperation:

– In the city of Offenbach in Germany, near Frankfurt, there’s a project called “Bridging the Gap” (Kein Abschluss ohne Anschluss) where social services and employment agencies help those from ethnic minority groups who are early school leavers.

This project in Germany is integrated with education, employment, and housing. Education takes an early intervention approach to prevent early school leaving and provides tutoring and

vocational education for those having special needs. The social services also connect with ethnic minority communities and empower parents and help them to find solutions.

– Employment services regard this as “transition management” that focuses on active labour market policies to encourage young people to find work, works with employers to promote a demand-led approach, and monitors and reports the ultimate results of the project. So it’s really an integrated approach for young people who have an ethnic minority background who are either early school leavers or at risk of early school leaving.

THE HAGUE WORKSHOP

Young persons at risk of marginalization or early retirement are a diverse group. In recognition of these young person’s varying life circumstances, and as a way of letting the members of ESN learn from each other’s work, the network recently arranged a workshop in The Hague that addressed how local public social services can work across sectors to facilitate the social and active inclusion of young people with mental health problems, young people leaving care, and young people with a refugee background.

– The ESN is indirectly involved in reducing the school dropout rate by sharing good practices and bringing together those in education and children’s services. The ESN’s Rome seminar, which took place a few years ago, looked specifically at this issue, and the ESN’s recent workshop on Vulnerable Youth

Speakers from across Europe participated in the workshop in The Hague, and among them was Project Manager Dr. Kolouh-Söderlund from The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues, who presented the project “Youth in the Nordic Countries”, which addresses youth and young adults in the age range from 16 to 29 years of age. The project analyses the transition from education into the labour market with regard to risk factors such as neuropsychiatric disorders, dyslexia, depression, substance abuse, and problematic and destructive home condi-

tions. Workshops like this enable members to learn from other European countries and to disseminate best Nordic practices and knowledge.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE YOUTH GUARANTEE

The ESN believes that the Youth Guarantee launched by the European Union has a lot of potential to provide vulnerable youngsters with opportunities in employment, education, and training. For the program to be effective, it needs to be adapted to the complex needs of young people who are at risk or who have mental health problems, for example, by involving social workers and mental health professionals in helping these young people find jobs and supporting them in the early stages of employment.

– Young people who have been in care are particularly vulnerable because they might lack the social relationship skills that many of us living in families take for granted. They might need additional help moving from an alternative family or institutional care to becoming more independent.

Halloran also addresses how social services need to be sensitive to cultural differences and to build into their policy and practice a working relationship with minority communities to enable all generations to become integrated and to become creative and active members of society.

“CAPACITY BUILDING AT ITS BEST”

– Local authorities need to build relationships with young people that continue beyond the usual school leaving age and follow them into their twenties to ensure they are properly settled in adult life, continues Halloran. He mentions the project “Right Here” as a good example of empowering young people who are at risk of marginalization. This project from Northern Ireland addresses the 40% of young people who are affected by mental illness as a direct result of unemployment.



John Halloran, Chief Executive, European Social Network.

– In fact, one tenth of these young people have been prescribed anti-depressants, and this rate actually doubles to 25 % among those who have been unemployed for over six months. This project and its youth work component helps to strengthen empowerment and resilience among these young people who might be experiencing

a lack of confidence or who might have been impacted by a troubled upbringing in a segregated environment. This is capacity building at its best.

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