

LeaveCare-LiveLife (LC-LL)

Building the European Care Leavers Network for youngsters leaving foster and residential care and actively living and participating in life

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CLPG – Care Leaver Participation Group

Handbook: Draft

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1: Introduction

This handbook is a guide produced by the European Care Leavers Network in the frame of the LeaveCare-LiveLife project (funded by Erasmus Plus programme) for conducting participation groups with care leavers. Conducting such groups is one of the activities of the network toward achieving the project aim. That aim is:

To create a space for improved participation of care leavers in decisions affecting their lives.

This aim is consistent with the 'Active Citizenship' agenda of the European Union, as developed through the work of the Economic and Social Committee (EESC). As Staffan Nilsson, EESC President in 2012, pointed out:

Active citizenship is the glue that keeps society together. Democracy doesn't function properly without it, because effective democracy is more than just placing a mark on a voting slip... By definition, participative democracy requires people to get involved, to play an active role... in their workplace, perhaps, or by taking part in a political organisation or supporting a good cause. The area of activity does not matter. It is the commitment to the welfare of society that counts. (European Economic and Social Committee, 2012: 4)

Care leavers, who have spent time in childhood in children's homes, foster care and other locations away from their birth families, are typically amongst the most disadvantaged young adults in Europe. They leave home early – usually aged 18 – for independent life without family support when most young people remain with their families until the mid-twenties and many for longer and retain their family support throughout most adult life. This work with care leavers is therefore consistent with the aims of the 'Europe for Citizens' Programme 2014-2020 adopted by the European Commission in 2014. In particular, it reflects the interest of that programme in democratic participation and civic engagement.

However, the countries of the European Union have different care systems, social policy frameworks, resources, cultures and practices. For example, Italy and Romania still have a majority of children in care in the residential sector whereas other countries (such as the UK, Croatia and Ireland) have a majority in foster (family-based) care. Hence the need to both share practices and attempt to develop some common approaches that allow for the diversity of European countries and the different practices and backgrounds within them.

The handbook is based on shared experiences between the members of the European Care Leavers Network. It incorporates the different participation strategies

and techniques used by the partner groups to build a common final handbook for use by the partners and by organisations in other European countries seeking to develop participation strategies for care leavers.

The materials in this handbook therefore reflect:

1. Existing experience of creating 'Participation Groups' amongst the ECLN partners.
2. The shared discussion and amalgamation of these approaches between the partners

The goal of the handbook is for European care leaver organisations to adopt a common approach – shared by the whole European Care Leavers Network, but with room for national variations – for conducting participation groups, that is groups focussed on improving participation amongst care leavers towards achieving higher levels of active participation and active citizenship, especially with regard to decisions that affect their immediate lives.

The common approach applies to the following areas:

- The recruitment of care leavers to the participation groups
- The location and environment of the groups
- The conduct of the groups
- The ensuring clear outcomes from the groups

It establishes a set of shared minimum expectations and standards for conducting such groups in the following areas:

- A signed consent and privacy agreement for care leaver participants
- The number of meetings with care leavers: between two and four
- The number of care leavers involved in meetings: approximately 15
- The number of total hours the meetings should cover: between 6 and 8
- The size of groups: the minimum of 15 can be spread between one, two three different groups.
- There should be a report, recommendations or other tangible outcomes from the groups
- There should be some evaluation of the group process and experience
- Conduct should accord with the agreed principles as set out elsewhere in this document.

- Purpose of the meetings should be established with care leaver members at the start of them and before the meeting is conducted.
- Meeting topics will include specific topics related to living in care and leaving care, for example: reception and life inside care system, support towards leaving care
- Care leaver participants will be selected on the basis of their motivation and capacity to express their opinions, explain their experiences, discuss openly with peers and take part in a participatory process that will enable the creation of a wider network for improving the services at their disposal.

2: Glossary

Youth Participation: *the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship (Hart, 1992: 5)*

Care Leavers: *A care leaver in this handbook is any young person between the ages of 16 and 25 years who spent time in care (foster care or residential care). In general, care leavers are all persons who left the care regardless of their age.*

CLPG: *definition to be added during next days by CLA*

Foster care: *definition to be added during next days by CLA*

Institutional care: *definition to be added during next days by CLA*

3: Participation Principles

The participation principles are intended to form the basis for European-wide work with care leavers through participation groups. They reflect the common views of the participating nations¹. Care Leaver Participation Groups promoters:

1. *Will promote active participation, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to contribute, but will keep in mind that varied levels and types of participation are possible based on the choice of care leavers.*
2. *Will try to achieve a group consensus without excluding anyone's voice and won't try to force agreement.*
3. *Will keep participants informed and consulted about outcomes throughout the length of the project at least.*
4. *Will involve Care leavers in all decision-making processes as much as possible and make them contribute to the agenda of the activities during the meetings.*
5. *Will show that all participation by care leavers is valued.*
6. *Will inform Care leavers at the beginning of the participation process about the purpose of the meetings and how the results will be used.*
7. *Will address Care leavers' participation needs fully in advance and will provide support where needed.*
8. *Will link with other organisations to ensure the participation of care leavers and the maximum result of the participation. Will also create meaningful engagements with external relevant parties.*
9. *Will create safe, non-judgemental, friendly and enjoyable spaces for care leavers to participate and will respect the relationships built up through the process, such as by keeping in contact with the participants.*
10. *Will ensure that facilitators have relevant training and experience with care leavers.*
11. *Will ensure that support after the meeting is available, if needed.*
12. *Will attempt to reflect the diversity of the care leaver population.*

4: Key Points of the CLPG Model

CLPG are an opportunity to hear the voice of care leavers, create spaces for active participation, share power within the group. Here are some key points to have on mind about preparation and implementation of CLPG.

Participants:

- Aged between 16 and 25
- Willing to participate in group activity: i.e. given a very clear choice about whether or not to participate in the meetings/discussion
- With some experience of residential or foster care as a child
- An attempt to achieve a diverse composition in the groups (age, care experience, gender, country of origin)

Preparation:

- Presentation of the network to participating organisations in advance of the meeting(s) with care leavers
- Request for participating organisations to help recruit care leavers
- Presentation of information about the care leavers network to care leavers who are interested in participating.
- A child protection and vulnerable persons policy needs to be either used or developed.

Process and Environment:

- Giving senior/older care leavers a key role as co-facilitators
- Providing a welcoming environment
- Agreeing 'Ground Rules' to promote a listening and non-judgemental culture
- A signed consent agreement regarding participation and use of materials from the group
- Evaluation at the end of the final meeting

Discussion

focusses on:

Knowledge: raising awareness of children's and human rights, explaining the purpose of the project

Sharing: young people sharing and comparing their experiences

¹ Italy, Croatia, Romania, Ireland, United Kingdom

Outcomes: ensuring there are clear results from the meeting to influence recommendations for change

Meetings: A Suggested Framework

- An early introductory activity
- Activities at the meetings may include games and other interactive forms of discussion (see attachment for suggestions from various countries).
- A privacy and consent agreement signed by all attenders at the meeting.
- Meetings have regular breaks for participants.
- Begin with a presentation of the purpose of the meeting, of care leaver led focus and choices over degree of participation. Also presentation of the goal; to improve the care system.
- Ensure time for individual as well as group contributions to the discussion.
- Group work: sharing of the individual work with the rest of the group
- Small group work: sub-groups of few participants, depending on the total number of the large group. Each group discusses the same agreed topic. Notes of what everyone is saying are taken, so important points are not missed.
- Large group work: each sub-group chooses someone to report their views back to the larger (whole) group. The key points are written on a board.
- Brief plenary (whole group) discussion.
- The group decides on format for presenting results; use of a variety of media (written, pictures, video)
- Outcomes: written up and presented in reports of various kinds, including pictures and video.

5: Variations, Issues and Possibilities

The following notes reflect ECLN sharing of alternative approaches to conducting effective participation meetings with care leavers. Much extra information and detail on these alternative approaches is provided in the attached documents from the ECLN participants.

- There may be problems in working with care leavers in larger groups reflecting national culture and care leaver experiences. This may lead to a need to work in small groups of three or four care leavers at a time.
- There may also be problems of working with severely disempowered young people due to institutionalisation.
- In some countries, there may be a lack of support services for care leavers outside the voluntary sector
- Working with other organisations who support care leavers, voluntary or state, can be one way to provide extra help to care leavers in the participation groups.
- Some groups may best achieve their goals by learning through dynamic play, creativity and co-operation activities.
- Evaluation can be conducted in written form both before and after activities.
- The importance of appropriate tools for play within a meeting context, providing a structure that allows for a playful and creative approach but towards a specific goal that can be an output at the end of the meeting or later.
- Those who conduct Participation Groups may need to be flexible, able to change direction within the meeting depending on how the discussion develops.
- Enhancing participation can be through group work but also through individual activities and sessions. Individual sessions can precede group work sessions.
- Participants can be assessed after meetings using confidence and empowerment measuring tools.
- One goal of meetings can be to influence or create national policies, charters and standards.
- Participation meetings can both develop and draw upon links with a range of policy actors and organisations

6: [Draft] Bibliography for developing Participation Techniques

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Creative thinking an essential skill for the 21st century
<https://inkbotdesign.com/creative-thinking/>

Creative problem solving
<http://www.creativeeducationfoundation.org/creative-problem-solving/>

The importance of evaluation <http://www.evalued.bcu.ac.uk/tutorial/importance.htm>

Active listening
<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html>

Learn through play
<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/play/according-experts/learning-through-play>

Playing to Heal: 5 Benefits of Play Therapy

<https://www.insightactiontherapy.com/playing-to-heal-5-benefits-of-play-therapy/>

Why play is important <http://www.playengland.org.uk/about-us/why-play-is-important/>

The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/119/1/182>

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