



THE PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

REPORT ON THE WORK CARRIED OUT IN 2024 BY
THE EUROPEAN NETWORK OF YOUNG ADVISORS
AS PART OF ENOC'S ANNUAL THEMATIC POLICY AREA



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Foreword

The European Network of Young Advisors (ENYA), established in 2009 as part of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), aims to involve children and young people in ENOC's policy work **by giving them the opportunity to express their views, and share their experiences.**

In 2024, ENYA focused on alternative care, addressing the unique challenges faced by children in these settings, who are often vulnerable to rights violations.

This year, 15 ENOC member institutions across Europe have participated in **the ENYA Project "Let's Talk Young, Let's Talk about the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Children in Alternative Care."** This project highlights the importance of ensuring quality care as well as the right of children to express their views and participate in decisions that affect them while preserving family and cultural connections in a supportive environment.

More than 200 Young People worked with their peers at the regional and national level to develop input and recommendations aimed at improving policies and services for children in alternative care.

Two Young Advisors per participating institution then attended **the ENYA Forum** in Bratislava, where they agreed on a set of recommendations that will help policy and decision makers to better protect and promote the rights of this group of children, and to build a more fair and child rights centered care system.

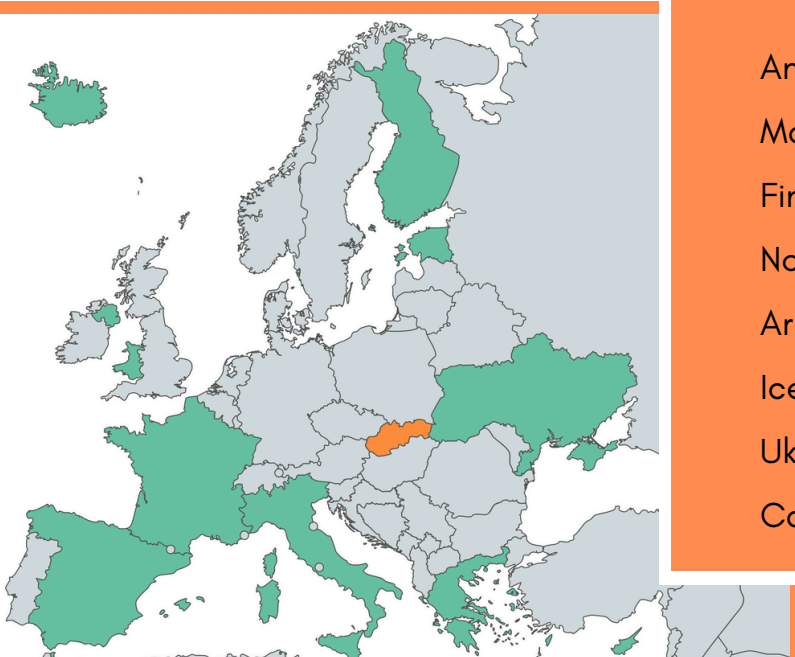
Introduction

The ENYA project is a collaborative initiative that empowers Young People to engage directly in discussions and decision-making processes related to children's rights.

The focus for the 2024 edition was on the theme **"Let's Talk Young, Let's Talk about the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Children in Alternative Care."**

Given the diverse alternative care systems across ENOC Member States, the project focused on recognising the specific needs of each form of care while ensuring every child's right to be heard.

This year, fifteen ENOC institutions from across Europe, took part in the ENYA Project. It was coordinated by the Office of the Commissioner for Children in Slovakia, which provided guidance and support throughout the project.



The participating institutions:

Andalusia/Spain	Wales/UK
Malta	Estonia
Finland	France
Northern Ireland/UK	Cyprus
Armenia	Greece
Iceland	Basque Country/Spain
Ukraine	Italy
Catalonia/Spain	

The process of the **ENYA Project 2024** included key phases :

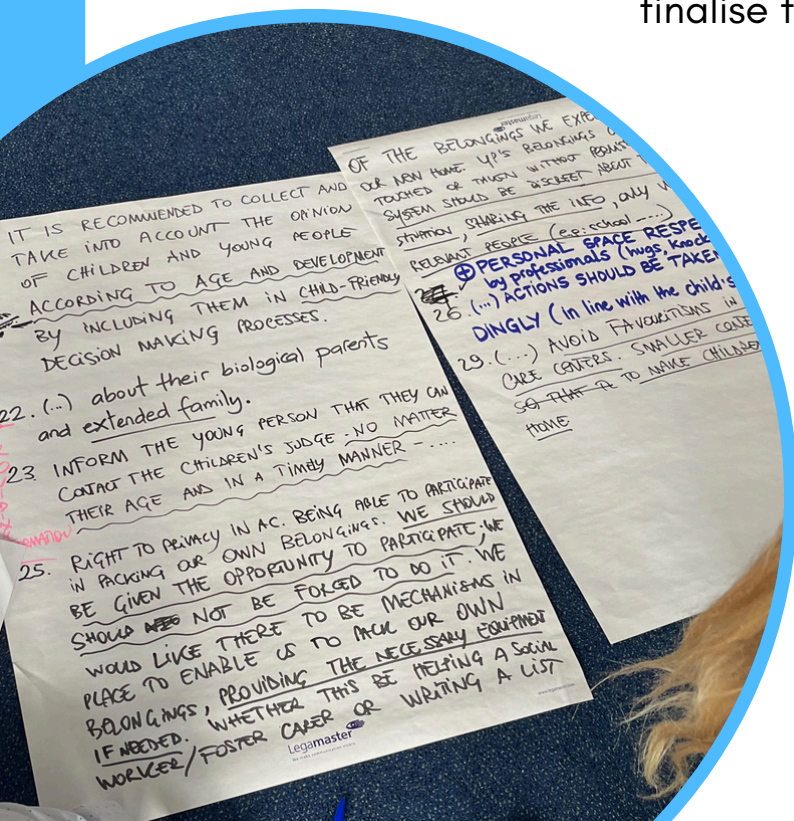
- In February, a training session was held for ENYA coordinators, focusing on child participation and child protection in participatory processes, as well as discussions on challenges and best practices in engaging with children in care.
- Then, from March to May, ENYA coordinators organized various meetings and activities with newly formed or existing groups of Young Advisors, across the 15 participating countries and regions.
- ➔ These meetings aimed to deepen understanding of children's rights, especially those of children in alternative care, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
Each participating region and country was encouraged to discuss and submit **5 rights-based recommendations** on the theme of children's rights in alternative care.

The next step of the ENYA Project was the ENYA Forum, where two Young Advisors from each participating country/region gathered to finalise the joint recommendations, marking the next step in the ENYA project.

A total of 208 young people participated in the ENYA Project



Among them, more than 140 participants had personal experience with alternative care.



The ENYA Forum

The ENYA Forum took place in Bratislava on 1 and 2 July 2024, hosted by **the Office of the Commissioner for Children in Slovakia**.

Andrej Peter (Slovakia) was the General Coordinator for the event.

The Forum brought together 31 young people, aged 12 to 17, from the 15 participating institutions.

The Young participants were supported by their country coordinators, who also facilitated various sessions during the two-day event.

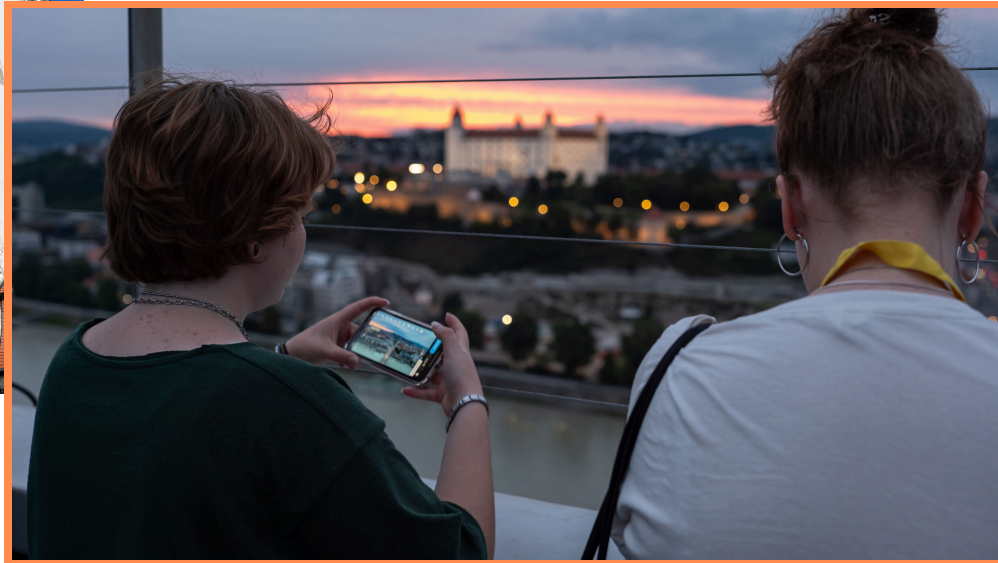
The interactive programme included a variety of sessions such as icebreakers and team-building activities, presentations from each of the 15 countries/regions highlighting key activities and discussions at the national/regional level, a workshop on creating safe and inclusive environments, and an experience-sharing workshop with care leavers.



The group also engaged in discussions to finalise recommendations on children's rights in alternative care, with Young Participants giving feedback and collaborating to develop and prioritise joint recommendations.



In addition to the workshops, the programme included energisers, icebreaking activities, a treasure hunt through the streets of Bratislava, and a sunset observation from the UFO Tower overlooking the Danube River.



On the final day, the Young Advisors visited the Slovak Parliament and the Committee for Human Rights and Minorities, where they received certificates from Mr. Ján Richter, Chair of the Committee for Social Affairs and Family.

The Slovak Commissioner for Children, Jozef Miklosko, the ENOC Chair, Caroline Vrijens, and other ENOC members were present throughout the Forum.



The ENYA recommendations

In anticipation of the ENYA Forum, **each participating institution submitted 5 right-based recommendations**, resulting in a total of 40 recommendations organised into 11 categories:

Raising Awareness
(4 recommendations)

Monitoring Rights in Alternative Care
(5 recommendations)

Placement in Alternative Care (3
recommendations)

Psychosocial Support and Individual
Approach (7 recommendations)

Care Leaving/Aftercare
(3 recommendations)

Relationship Bonds and Family Ties
(2 recommendations)

Providing Information to Young People
(3 recommendations)

Professional Training
(1 recommendation)

Individual Rights
(7 recommendations)

Child Participation
(3 recommendations)

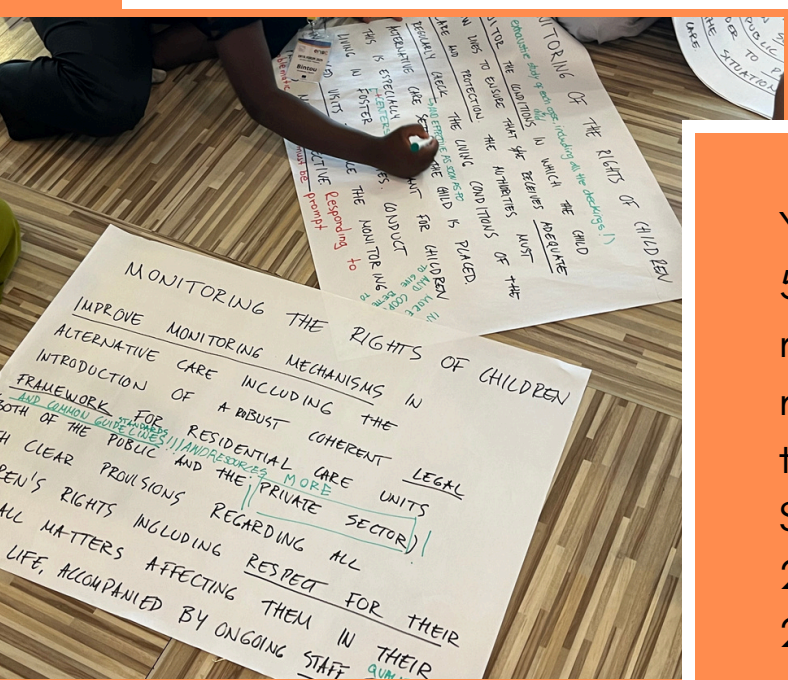
Prevention
(2 recommendations)

The ENYA General Coordinator collected the different recommendations submitted by country teams and shared them with country Coordinators in advance of the Forum.

At the ENYA Forum, **Young Advisors reviewed and discussed the recommendations to fully understand the input from different countries/regions.**

Voting System:

Each young participant had 5 votes and one preferential vote (indicated by a circle in the recommendations) for their top priority.



Young people were asked to vote on their 5 preferred recommendations. The recommendations with the highest number of votes - 10 recommendations in total - were reflected in the ENOC policy Statement to be adopted at the ENOC 28th General Assembly in September 2024.

The full list of recommendations, along with the vote counts for the top 10 most-voted recommendations, is included in the Annex of this report.

Conclusion

The Young Participants have actively engaged in the ENYA process at both national, regional, and European levels. Through their recommendations, **they have strongly highlighted the critical need to protect and promote the rights of children in alternative care.**

These young voices will further present their work at the ENOC 28th Annual Conference in Helsinki, Finland, in September 2024.

Now, it is essential for institutions committed to children's rights to truly listen and act on what participating young people have shared as experience and recommended as action for improvement.

Annex - List of recommendations

Raising awareness

1. Promote de-institutionalization and a foster family system in countries where it is not implemented sufficiently. Raise awareness of family forms of upbringing so that every child who lives in an institutional facility or returns from deportation or forced removal has the opportunity to get into a family and receive a proper upbringing and environment. This must be done at all levels both at the level of the state, public organisations and mass media, and can be promoted through various channels, such as informative videos, school programs, books (including comics and storybooks), social media and films that portray children in care positively.

2. Improve the public perception of children's centres in order to prevent discrimination and reduce stigma.

3. Teach the rights of children in alternative care in schools, kindergartens and all levels of education and within alternative care settings to empower children to know their rights (and respect for other's rights) and stand for them.

4. Educate children about the care system, explaining what foster care and care centers are, and the conditions under which they might return to their biological families.

Monitoring respect for the rights of children in alternative care

5. Improve monitoring mechanisms in alternative care including the introduction of a robust coherent legal framework at country level for residential care units (both public and private sector) and common guidelines, standards and resources. Standards should be age-appropriate and children's opinions should be taken into consideration while drafting them. Allow private care only in exceptional cases due to limited oversight. Highlight that children's welfare should not be compromised for financial gain. Establish clear provisions that protect all children's rights, including the right to have their views respected in all matters affecting their daily lives, and ensure ongoing staff training for qualified care.

6. Monitor the conditions in which the child lives to ensure that s/he receives adequate care and protection. The authorities must regularly and effectively check the living conditions of the alternative care setting the child is placed in as soon as possible. This is especially important for children living in both centres and foster families. Conduct unannounced visits to make monitoring processes more effective. Respond and find solutions promptly to problematic situations about living conditions and not about what the child is doing. The process of monitoring should be written down and there should be an exhaustive study of each child's situation.

8 votes (1 Circle)

7. Encourage greater collaboration and information sharing among institutions to enhance the quality of care for children.

8. If a young person wants to report, he/she should be given the possibility to do so without the care person's presence.

9. There should be an appointed person to address problems and to report accordingly and promptly.

Placement of children into Alternative Care

0. Strengthen mechanisms to prevent unnecessary separation of children from their families, ensuring that any decision made is in the child's best interests.

11. If possible do not remove the child or young person from their territory or culture once they become part of the protection system in order to reduce the amount of changes young people have to face.

7 votes (0 circles)

12. Improve the process and time of determining the type of alternative care for each case. Prioritize placing children in family-like environments whenever possible, while recognizing that residential care may be necessary in some cases. Ensure that any placement is safe and in the child's best interest. When making a decision, take into account the child's opinion according to age and development, also many circumstances in practice, such as the interests of children and potential guardians and support workers and other circumstances characterizing the person. Before making a decision, children and caregivers should get to know each other. Take steps so that children no longer receive care in institutions but live in an environment close to the family.

8 votes (0 circles)

Psychosocial support – individual approach

13. Provide an individual approach to each child, taking into account their individual needs and circumstances. Provide psychological support to help the child cope with emotional difficulties when entering a new environment. Children and young people in alternative care often need the help of mental health specialists. Increase the number of mental health specialists to ensure accessibility for all children. Specialists should have a diverse range of skills to avoid unnecessary referrals. Psychological support must be available free of charge and without restrictions. Mandatory check-ups should occur after every move to ensure continuity of care.

13 votes (1 circle)

14. Provide therapy that is adapted to each child's needs and interests, allowing them to express themselves in various ways. This should include diverse forms of therapy, such as animal therapy, art therapy, and psychodrama, beyond traditional talk therapy. Therapy options should be available in both group and individual settings, depending on the child's preference.

15. Ensure that children in alternative care have access to a consistent support network of adults and know whom to contact 24/7. This could be achieved by assigning a team of social workers or support staff, rather than relying on a single social worker. Whenever possible, maintain and plan regular contact with the child's family.

16. Support emotional literacy and therapeutic support in the form of therapeutic group work in schools, focusing on the child's emotional well-being.

17. Provide free psychosocial support to parents who are not able to exercise their parental role, encourage the child's contact in a pertinent way to allow re-building of trust with the parent, and ensure proper monitoring of reunification progress by social services in the community. Provide aftercare support: Young adults leaving alternative care after the age of 18 should be offered financial and psychosocial support, to promote and facilitate their social inclusion, until they can stand on their own feet (at least until the age of 24).

8 votes (0 circles)

18. Ensure that there are enough human, social and economical resources to cover children's needs.

19. Every member of the foster family, including biological children, should have access to a psychologist.

Care Leaving/Aftercare

20. Improve aftercare mechanisms with regular follow-ups, including meetings, phone calls, and home visits, provided by skilled professionals with specialized training.

21. Begin preparing young people for their transition to adulthood well before the age of 18, focusing on developing skills for professional life and supporting those who wish to pursue further education.

22. Ensure that all young persons have an individual plan for aftercare and support for housing, to find a job or for studies after 18 (up to the age of 24 depending on the needs -“pathway plan”).

8 votes (2 circles)

Relationship bond/family ties

23. Efforts need to be made to enable children to maintain contact/relationships with siblings, especially if they are unable to live together. Communication with parents should be maintained with the consent of children, and only if it is in their best interest.

24. Prioritize children and young people’s opinions and establish strong, trusting relationships between them and the person of trust within the care system. This requires creating clear, shared communication channels and adopting appropriate methods to ensure children’s needs are fully understood and addressed.

Training of professionals

25. All adults involved in the lives of children in alternative care should receive ongoing training on various issues including:

- **Children’s rights**
- **Mental health and wellbeing**
- **Dealing with trauma**
- **Understanding neuro diversity**
- **Disability**
- **Emotional development of teenagers**
- **Current challenges faced by children and young people**

Training of communication skills, including non verbal communication, need to be cocreated with carers and adults together with the young people. Carers should have peer support and someone to call for advice.

(9 votes (one circle))

Child participation

26. It is recommended to collect and take into account the opinion of children and young people according to age and development by including them in child-friendly decision-making processes, especially on aspects related to the dynamics of the residential centres where they live. Spaces for real and significant participation must be guaranteed, and it must be promoted that children and young people are informed about how their contributions will materialize. Include the children and the young people in their own care meetings. There should be stronger guidance on how to involve them meaningfully in decisions about their care, with two-way communication and feedback.

27. Creation of a council of young people in alternative care and those in after-care to defend the rights of this group of children. It is recommended to create a participatory body that ensures that the rights of children and young people in alternative care are respected. This council would address matters that neither the child protection body nor its territorial teams often resolve with the necessary speed. (youth club, council etc.)

10 votes (8 circles)

28. Creating community with Youth clubs for children in alternative care, which should provide a space for them to share ideas, support one another, learn about their rights, and feel empowered to advocate for themselves.

Providing information to Young People

29. Make sure that children and young people in alternative care have access to their personal history. They often lack sufficient knowledge about their childhood, origins, and biological families. It is crucial that we are provided with this important information. The interests of the child are paramount, and children have a right to know about their background. A child should have a life book with photos, videos, documents etc, on paper and digitally. It is the responsibility of child protection officials, carers, relatives, friends, and the young persons themselves to fill the life book. The life book should be filled frequently but only with meaningful information. Note: This should be carefully considered case by case.

30. Inform the young person that they can contact the children's judge, no matter their age and in a timely manner, if the young person does not agree with the schooling decision or provide for an appeal if the child's choice is not respected.

31. Need for more communication and information that is needs appropriate – especially regarding decisions taken.

Individual rights

32. Ensure and respect the right to privacy for children in alternative care. Allow them to participate in packing their belongings if they choose, providing necessary support. Personal items should not be touched or moved without their permission. Handle their situations discreetly, sharing information only with relevant parties, such as schools. Professionals must also respect personal space by knocking on doors and asking for consent before physical contact.

33. Right to be heard (All children must be heard and their words taken seriously) and actions taken accordingly, in line with the child's opinion, and they must be trusted. Adults should not make assumptions about our feelings and should believe what we tell them.

9 votes (0 circles)

34. Children must have the right to choose educational path, regardless of their origin or nationality (case of unaccompanied children who are pushed to do short studies to be independent as soon as possible).

35. Provide immediate health care and intervene immediately if a child in alternative care becomes ill and ensure that they are promptly taken to see a doctor.

36. Right to be equally treated, loved and taken care of. Favouritism should be avoided in foster centres. Smaller centres are needed to make children feel like home.

6 votes (3 circles)

37. Right to preserve cultural ties and bonds, non-discrimination of children and young people and the free expression of their identity, culture or religion is recommended. Allow children and young people to follow the traditions and rules of their own ideology or religion. Allow them to travel to visit their families during celebrations such as holidays, weddings, funerals, etc. (example of preserving cultural ties and bonds: Arrange for young people to cook for themselves several times a week so that they can cook dishes from their country of origin).

38. Children and young people have the right to body integrity, and to be protected from violence within care settings. They have the right to freedom of expression. These issues could be discussed for example in trainings for parents and carers. (Young people in alternative care would like to have a say about their body and appearance. They feel that they are not allowed to do things that other young people would be allowed to do).

Prevention

39. Invest in prevention and gatekeeping: Provide psychosocial and financial support to vulnerable families (e.g. at risk of poverty and social exclusion, with children with disabilities) through an integrated child protection system, to facilitate and improve the provision of parental care and the relationship between parent(s) and children and to avoid removal. Identify and proactively manage risk factors to avoid situations of abandonment and vulnerability.

40. Promote deinstitutionalisation: Carefully plan and implement the deinstitutionalisation of children living in residential care facilities. Introduce and develop family-based models of alternative care such as foster care. Apply foster care solutions in all cases of removal. Monitor and provide support to children and foster families.



Thank you to all participating countries and young people for their great contribution.

It was an honour for the Office of the Commissioner for Children in Slovakia to organise the ENYA 2024 Forum.

Special thanks go to the ENOC Secretariat, Polina and Clara, and to Suzanne (Malta) and Laura (Northern Ireland) for their extensive help and support.