



Co-funded by  
the European Union



# Recommendations for Supporting Guardians Assisting Unaccompanied and Separated Children in the Transition to Adulthood

## My Coming of Age Story (CO.A.ST)

The EU AMIF-funded **My Coming of Age Story (CO.A.ST project)** aims to improve support for guardians of unaccompanied and separated children\* according to their specific needs with the aim of ensuring fulfilment of their rights and assisting them in their transition to adulthood. As part of the CO.A.ST project, the partners carried out research and activities in France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia involving unaccompanied children and youth, guardians, and other professionals who are supporting unaccompanied children in the transition to adulthood.

Based on our research findings, we recommend that governments and other key stakeholders across Europe prioritise the interventions below to ensure respect for the best interests of these children and to promote their independence and integration as they transition to adulthood. Furthermore, their continued vulnerability and need for support should be recognised even after their transition to adulthood as they may need additional support to ensure their social inclusion.

## A BRIEF NOTE REGARDING THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

The recommendations below aim to advance the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child including the key principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to participation, and the right to life and development. The Convention is the cornerstone of child protection. The UN Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children are also a valuable document for child protection and should be taken into consideration for the preparation of aftercare planning and support.

At a regional level, there are important standards and recommendations from the Council of Europe that address themes such as guardianship, life projects, and support for young refugees in the transition to adulthood (See also [CO.A.ST Toolkit](#)). While EU law does not specifically address support for the transition to adulthood, some measures are encouraged in relevant EU action plans and strategies. Most notably, with regards to the role of the unaccompanied child's guardian, the implementation of the **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum** includes provisions regarding the guardian's timely appointment, role, independence, necessary training, caseload, and supervision.

\* Throughout this document, the term "unaccompanied children" is used to refer to unaccompanied and separated children and youth, unless otherwise specified.

## 1. TAKE A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO IDENTIFYING AND MONITORING THE RIGHTS AND NEEDS OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AS THEY TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Our research shows that many key stakeholders are unaware of the realities and challenges experienced by unaccompanied children and youth as well as the guardians and other professionals who support them in the transition to adulthood. Lack of preparation and continuity of support to unaccompanied children and youth heighten the risks of exclusion, exploitation, and marginalisation of youth during this formative phase of their development. Many unaccompanied children and youth have specific needs because of their challenging past experiences. While it is often assumed that they would already be treated as adults in their country of origin, it is crucial to recognise that the transition to adulthood is a critical stage in the life of every young person. Therefore, it is important to set standards to proactively prepare and empower unaccompanied children for the transition to adulthood and to monitor progress toward these commitments. The specific needs of unaccompanied children during the transition to adulthood must first and foremost be identified in order to ensure that the care and protection they need is provided to them, regardless of their residence status.

### Member States should:

- **Involve unaccompanied children and youth** in the process of identifying their specific needs during the transition to adulthood.
- **Set measures and objectives for the support provided to unaccompanied children and youth** in the transition to adulthood and the desired outcomes of this support.
- **Increase efforts to adopt quality standard indicators** in order to monitor outcomes and publish data to inform policy making and financial resources allocation. Such monitoring should also identify gaps and needs to be addressed in system reform to improve outcomes for unaccompanied children and youth through better support and access to services.
- **Together with civil society and nongovernmental stakeholders, ensure that unaccompanied children and youth have an active participatory role** in policy influencing, policy making, and monitoring. Unaccompanied children and youth should be systematically and meaningfully involved in this as well as in developing awareness raising activities, for instance, through storytelling.

## 2. DEVELOP AND ADEQUATELY RESOURCE QUALITY GUARDIANSHIP SYSTEMS

Our research found that one of the most pressing concerns is the shortage of guardians for unaccompanied children across the six project countries, which impacts the support children receive as they transition to adulthood. This means that in some countries unaccompanied children have never been appointed a guardian or the appointment has been significantly delayed. In other cases, children are not referred to the guardianship system because they are not correctly identified as being underage or as being unaccompanied or separated. In some countries unaccompanied children are excluded from eligibility for the support of a guardian unless they file an asylum application. Indeed, the treatment of unaccompanied children varies greatly across EU Member States. Despite variations in legal systems and social welfare structures, a recurring challenge persists: the demand for guardians far exceeds the available number of guardians. In some national contexts, this has led to high caseloads, which limits the effectiveness of the guardian to provide tailored individual support, including as unaccompanied children transition to adulthood. The research also highlighted concerns over inadequate financial reimbursement of guardians, the absence of structured monitoring mechanisms, including the

participation of children in feedback processes. Whatever the context and national guardianship model, common standards, for example the EU Fundamental Rights Agency Handbook on Guardianship, and the European Guardianship Network's Standards for Guardianship, should be applied in all instances.

**Member States should:**

- **Improve vulnerability assessment, identification, and referral systems** to ensure that all unaccompanied children are identified and swiftly appointed a guardian.
- **Establish child-centered quality guardianship systems** based on European standards that ensure timely access to vetted, trained, resourced, and supported guardians with appropriate oversight. Child-friendly complaint mechanisms should be an integral part of monitoring and evaluation systems.
- **Implement national laws and policies** that provide for consistency and continuity of guardianship of unaccompanied children in all stages and procedures including continued support during the transition to adulthood.
- **Provide adequate resources to the guardianship system** so caseloads are such that unaccompanied children can receive the support they need. It is important to consider the necessity for continuity and the stable presence of their guardian to ensure an adequate response to the child's needs and, when this is not possible, to promote effective collaboration between the guardians or other professionals involved.
- **Take efforts to improve the recruitment of guardians and to promote the development of ethical codes for guardians** where these do not exist to ensure adequate response to the child's needs.
- **Raise awareness and promote the important role of guardians** and facilitate effective collaboration between them, also considering best practices already existing in other Member States.

### **3. STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITY OF GUARDIANS AND OTHER ACTORS THROUGH TRAINING AND NETWORKING**

**We found that there is a lack of specialised training for guardians across most countries.** Without structured training, both guardians and other actors struggle to provide adequate guidance to unaccompanied children and youth, who are often dealing with highly complex legal procedures, family expectations, and psychological challenges, including as they transition to adulthood. Many guardians and other professionals interviewed expressed an urgent need for a comprehensive training program that would equip them with the legal, social, and psychological skills necessary to fulfill their duties effectively.

**Member States should:**

- **Introduce mandatory initial training programs for guardians** as well as ongoing mandatory professional development trainings, in countries where they are not currently in place. Such training should cover child development and psychosocial needs, cultural information as well as legal and administrative frameworks. As every child has the right to preserve and develop their identity, it is crucial that guardians possess knowledge about the child's culture, awareness of different ideas of what it means to be an adult, and to be mature. The basic training programme should include specific topics on transition to adulthood and life skills needed in adulthood.

- **Develop and fund specialised capacity building for guardians** through continued professional development and training programs that incorporate more experiential learning opportunities. The inclusion of first-hand accounts from experienced guardians and former unaccompanied children and youth would provide valuable insights into the practical realities of the role.
- **Ensure that training programs serve as a platform for networking**, fostering collaboration among guardians, child protection services, and other key stakeholders.

#### 4. DEVELOP PEER-TO-PEER AND INTERDISCIPLINARY SUPPORT NETWORKS FOR GUARDIANS

**Unaccompanied children often have a range of diverse needs, from interpretation and cultural mediation to legal assistance and psychosocial support.** Our research found that guardians often lack the support needed to assist unaccompanied children and to do their work effectively. This is demonstrated by difficulties and barriers in accessing interpreters, cultural mediators, and legal counselling and legal assistance. In addition, social workers and aftercare workers, who ideally accompany the youth and their guardian, are often under-resourced. Peer-to-peer support is key for guardians especially when it is organised into formal or informal associations. Additionally, interagency cooperation is also essential to ensure that guardians can facilitate access to all the necessary services and support a child may require. Our research found that some guardians were unaware of how to reach out for help to the relevant authorities or services including those provided by NGOs. In many contexts, there is an urgent need to create networks of external, specialised services for guardians, including legal assistance and psychosocial support. Strengthening support to guardians is fundamental to preventing burnout and isolation, which can arise when cooperation between different stakeholders is lacking.

##### Member States should:

- **Encourage and support peer-to-peer networks** as a platform where guardians can exchange information, experience, and advice. The views of guardians could also be solicited, in collaboration with civil society and nongovernmental stakeholders, through such networks to inform analysis on how to better improve relevant laws, policies, and practices related to supporting unaccompanied youth in the transition to adulthood.
- **Facilitate effective collaboration between guardians and all competent services** (justice, social, mental health, and education, etc.) and provide resources for the development of interdisciplinary support networks that allow guardians to collaborate more closely with other professionals such as social workers, psychologists, educators, health professionals, and lawyers, including through the provision of pro bono legal assistance. This would enable guardians to holistically address the child's needs as they transition to adulthood.

##### The European Union should:

- **Continue to support the European Guardianship Network**, which aims to promote guardianship and improve guardianship services for unaccompanied children by exchanging good practices, expertise, and other relevant information as well as through sharing ideas and cooperation on common challenges and cross-border work.

## 5. ENHANCE CHILD-CENTRED, INTERAGENCY CASE MANAGEMENT DURING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

### **Unaccompanied children interact daily with multiple professionals who contribute to their care and support.**

Within this complex network of support, it can be difficult for guardians to explain their specific function and how it differs from others involved in a child's life. The research participants reported that there is a lack of clarity for both the professionals and the children regarding the extent of the guardian's role and the scope of their duties and obligations. This lack of clarity extends to other actors' responsibilities, and how these link to the guardian's role, especially as unaccompanied children reach adulthood given the more complex legal and support framework at that stage. In many cases, overlapping competencies create challenges in the care and support of unaccompanied children leading to inefficiencies, confusion, and gaps in responsibility, ultimately affecting the quality and continuity of support provided to children. Child-centred, individual case management must be improved in a manner that facilitates interagency collaboration.

Transition to adulthood needs to include structured and systematic planning informed by the individual youth's lived experience and wishes. The research highlighted a lack of this planning for unaccompanied children transitioning out of guardianship upon reaching the age of 18 and an urgent need for more structured and coherent transition plans. This is particularly the case because support often ends abruptly when a child turns 18. A transitional period and aftercare support are essential so children can continue to access support, including from key stakeholders such as guardians, legal professionals, and other care professionals. Without proper planning, timely interventions, and support that ensures a period of transition, many young individuals may struggle with challenges related to autonomy, emotional stability, and overall integration into society.

### **Member States should:**

- **Establish clear and comprehensive child-centred, rights-based standard operating procedures (SOPs) for transition to adulthood which clarify the role and responsibilities of each stakeholder and their mandate, including the guardian.** Such SOPs should promote multidisciplinary and interagency cooperation, ensuring continuity and stability in the support an unaccompanied child receives, including into adulthood, similar to that provided to child nationals, who are leaving care.
- **Ensure that the child protection authorities responsible for the care of unaccompanied children prepare and base their support on structured and coherent transition to adulthood plans, strengthening child-centred, individual case management using social work and care planning tools.** Planning for the transition to adulthood should start as soon as possible, in accordance with the best interests of the child, and ideally no later than the child's 16th birthday. The transition to adulthood plans should span the phase before and after the coming of age: on the one hand, allowing for adequate preparation time to be given to proactively thinking and planning for the transition to adulthood, including acquiring necessary life skills; and on the other hand, for aftercare planning to ensure a stable and secure future for every young person.
- **Together with NGOs and in systematic and meaningful consultation with unaccompanied children and youth, develop and implement procedures that improve coordination and stronger case management between different actors supporting unaccompanied children and youth in the transition to adulthood, including addressing the complementary roles of the guardian and the child's lawyer.**

## 6. ASSIST YOUTH TO GAIN SECURE RESIDENCE STATUS AND GUARANTEED ACCESS TO SUPPORT AND SERVICES

**Securing stable residence status, safe accommodation, and employment are recognised as key challenges for unaccompanied children and youth in the transition to adulthood.** In order to ensure that unaccompanied children and youth can exercise their rights, the provision of child-friendly information and free, quality legal assistance and access to procedures that grant residency on a variety of different grounds must be improved. Our research found that key steps include not only securing an improved or permanent residence status, which provides legal stability and access to opportunities, but also addressing the psychosocial aspects of adulthood -- emotional resilience, mental well-being, and the development of essential life skills -- are crucial in equipping young people to navigate the complexities of independent living. Unaccompanied children and youth would also benefit from targeted integration support and the development of life skills such as financial literacy and job-seeking skills.

### Member States should:

- **Establish a common framework to underpin a child-centred, interagency approach** allowing guardians to help unaccompanied children access necessary services, including free specialised legal assistance, particularly when needed to secure stable residence status before they age out.
- **Ensure that unaccompanied youth do not become undocumented upon turning 18** and extend residence permits temporarily to allow them to access permits on other grounds (e.g. for studies, work, social ties, international protection, or humanitarian grounds).
- **Adopt legislation and policies to ensure that unaccompanied children and youth are entitled to a care plan, aftercare, and related support before, during and after turning 18, regardless of their residence status.** Such measures should ensure non-discriminatory access to services as well as continuity and stability for every young person as they transition to adulthood. Aftercare support should include the provision of residence status. Moreover, aftercare support should be extended on the same conditions as for other youth in the national system, e.g., continued support for those who are involved in education and training, who are not sufficiently self-reliant yet, or who need continued support.
- **Allocate the necessary resources to aftercare planning and support,** in order to assist unaccompanied youth to access safe accommodation, psychosocial support, and other health services.
- **Provide funding to nongovernmental organisations who provide free and specialised legal assistance and psychosocial support** to unaccompanied youth in order to ensure their social inclusion and emotional stability during the transition period.

## 7. FOSTER A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH TO WELCOMING AND INTEGRATION

**Our focus group research highlighted the importance of building relationships and the need to strengthen opportunities for meaningful exchanges between unaccompanied children and members of their communities through sports, recreational activities, and other social interactions.** Such relationships and opportunities to participate in public life foster a feeling of belonging and support the long-term well-being and integration of unaccompanied children and youth.

Access to vocational training opportunities and policies that promote active labour market inclusion are also essential for integration. Such relationships and activities can provide continuity and opportunities as unaccompanied youth transition to adulthood.

**Member States should:**

- **Combat discrimination and facilitate labour market inclusion**, including by making sure that unaccompanied children and youth can work to the same degree and with the same conditions as their national peers. Relevant authorities could collaborate with private sector actors, schools, and tertiary education institutions to create a virtual marketplace with the aim of matching unaccompanied youth with suitable apprenticeships, jobs, or studies.
- **Promote and support mentoring and buddy programmes** through the provision of small grants, exchange of best practices, and training.
- **Ensure that unaccompanied children are actively encouraged and empowered** to participate freely in their communities by engaging in activities, for example becoming members of student and youth councils in their school.
- **Remove financial and administrative barriers that prevent unaccompanied youth from engaging in sports, and cultural and social activities**, and implement good practices such as the granting of cultural passes, fee reduction programmes, or city cards that enable participation in public life and access to cultural activities.



Co-funded by  
the European Union

**This policy brief has been drawn up in the framework of the project CO.A.ST – My Coming of Age Story co-financed by the European Union (Project 101141181 CO.A.ST-Amif 2023-TF2-AG-Call).**

**Views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission.**

**Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.**