

UNICEF BULGARIA Evaluation Management Response

Evaluation title: Formative and Summative Evaluation of the Childcare and Deinstitutionalization Reforms in Europe and Central Asia 2009 - 2022
Bulgaria Country Report

Year: 2022 - 2024

Office and persons in charge of the management response:

- Dessislava Encheva, Social Policy and Local Services Officer, UNICEF Bulgaria
- Daniela Koleva, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF Bulgaria
- Elena Atanassova, Child Rights Monitoring Specialist, UNICEF Bulgaria

Overall response to the evaluation:

Out of 9 recommendations which the national report for Bulgaria has recommended, UNICEF Bulgaria found that all are relevant and if implemented would contribute to the further development, quality and sustainability of community-based services and alternative care in the country, the social services workforce (SSW) capacity, co-ordinated provision of support to vulnerable children and parents and improvement of data management.

It should be noted that the responsibilities for most of the recommendations' implementation lie with the key Ministries and Agencies engaged in the childcare reform. Guided by the UNICEF Strategic plan 2022 – 2025, UNICEF Child Protection strategy 2021 – 2030 and in accordance with the human-rights approach, UNICEF will continue supporting the duty bearers and rights holders to protect, fulfil and promote children's rights. This will include advocating and strengthening the capacity, the resources and the political will of national and local authorities to meet their obligations and supporting individuals and communities to be informed about their rights, to participate in decisions which affect them and claim their rights when they are violated.

The findings from the draft report for Bulgaria and the relevant recommendations were validated with the External Reference Group (ERG), set up for the purposes of the evaluation, during an online meeting in May 2024. The draft report was circulated for written comments, which were addressed by the evaluation team. The final report for Bulgaria in Bulgarian and the multi-country evaluation report for all 7 countries in English were shared with key national stakeholders and NGOs representatives who contributed to the evaluation and were part of the ERG in December 2024. The

The below management response outlines some of the actions already undertaken by the Government – e.g. with regards to Foster care – and UNICEF plans to continue advocating and supporting the provision of services for the most vulnerable, the child protection system and social services workforce strengthening.

Building on the momentum of the Global "Children's Care Reform" campaign, launched in Bulgaria on 17th January 2025, by the United Kingdom's Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the Rt. Hon. David Lammy MP, UNICEF Bulgaria will continue contributing to showcasing Bulgaria's impressive

progress in the childcare reform, achievements and lessons learned with the aim to inspire and inform global action and implementation of the campaign. The CO has committed to support the development of an info-graphic which to present major achievements, on-going challenges and lessons learned.

UNICEF will also strengthen its advocacy on the issue (including with UK and other key Embassies) and support provided to key line Ministries in the country to promote a joined-up approach to early childhood development, inclusive education and child protection system strengthening.

Key entry points for the targeted advocacy with Line Ministries will be the development and finalisation of the Operational plan 2025-2026 for the implementation of the EU CG NAP 2030 as well as the Action Plan 2025-2026 for the implementation of the National Programme for Prevention of Violence and Child Abuse 2023-2026. UNICEF Bulgaria will be also exploring opportunities for resource mobilization for critical/key interventions related to the recommendations which the CO has the expertise, skills, and partnerships if funding is secured.

Were there shortfalls or limitations in the process and/outcomes?

The period of the conduction of the evaluation in Bulgaria was marked with political changes and instability which in turn led to a delay in its finalization. However, this challenge did not affect the final product as the key stakeholders at national level – MLSP, ASA, SACP, continued to be committed to deinstitutionalisation and child care reform agenda.

Are there any additional insights not articulated in the recommendations? The evaluation covered all key issues related to the child care reform in Bulgaria and the major issues related to its management, implementation and lessons learned. Given that the Government is often invited to present its experience, achievements and challenges, it could have been beneficial to outline and highlight some of the good practices developed as part of the country journey and in particular the development of a long-term vision (2010-2025) with a concrete action plan (2010-2016 and 2016-2025) and funding to implement it amounting to more than 100 million euro from ESF+ and national budget; the investments and joint management of different ESF+ funds – HR, RR, rural development, the mechanism for management and monitoring of the reform implementation at national, regional and local level, etc.

Planned use of the evaluation: The finalised report in English and the translation in Bulgarian will be uploaded on UNICEF Bulgaria site and shared widely with all relevant national and local authorities, NGOs and coalitions, Academia, funding organisations such as Tanya’s Dream Fund, Foundation Workshop for Civil Initiatives, EC representatives, etc. The evaluation findings and recommendations will be further used by the CO to continue advocating for and support the implementation of a holistic Child Care Reform agenda with a focus on:

- Strengthen and invest in CP system capacity which continues to be understaffed, underpaid, with a high turn-over and low motivation and addressing its capacity requires a systemic approach and investment in professionalization of social work and social services workforce.
- A funding mechanism for activities related to recruitment and assessment of foster carers, training, support and monitoring should be developed and provided for within the State budget (vs. the EU funding which was extended by Dec 2025);
- Ensure parenting support and preventing separation from birth parents including access to universal and targeted services such as home visiting and early childhood intervention, developmental monitoring and changing attitudes of health and education providers on the rights of children with disabilities and other marginalized groups (*links with home visiting, ECD and ECI*)

- Strengthen pre-school and school inclusive education including capacity of staff and behaviour and attitudinal change in kindergartens/schools and services in communities where children from closed institutions are returning or placed to support access and learning for all children. *(links with inclusive education)*
- The international report of the multi-country evaluation will be also used to share learning with partners and donors.

Evaluation Recommendation 1: **Planning:** Review the results of the Action Plan 2016 and conduct an impact assessment of the DI Vision, with a focus on achievements and challenges, with a view to recalibration of activities in the DI Vision and to inform the two-year Operational Action Plan to the 2030 National Action Plan. There should be a particular focus on closure of the four remaining infant homes; the continued development and provision of community-based services; family-based alternative care, especially for children with disabilities and hard to place children, capacity-building of the social services workforce and a reduction in the use of FTPCs.

Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): **PARTIALLY AGREE**

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.

Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
As the key duty bearer for the recommendation is the Bulgarian Government, UNICEF will continue advocating and providing input for the development and finalisation of the Operational Action Plan 2025-2026 for the Implementation of the EU CG NAP 2030 to strengthen the provision of community-based services, SSW capacity, etc.	Dessislava Encheva Daniela Koleva	March 2025	Underway	UNICEF has provided input following the request of the MLSP for the first draft of the Operational Plan.	Input submitted to the MLSP is available in Bulgarian. It is envisaged that the draft will be submitted to the WG for discussion in Jan and further input and feedback might be required.

Evaluation Recommendation 2: **Undertake a critical review of the staffing, training, functioning and administration of the Child Protection Departments, including a vision of what the Child Protection Department should be delivering, the current situation and strategic approaches for moving forward, including strengthening the capacity of social workers to undertake work with children and families; provision of administrative and technical support to improve efficiency and management of workload; remuneration and career progression for the workforce; effective management to reduce turn-over of staff; in-service continuous education; supervision and support and monitoring and data collection.**

Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): **PARTIALLY AGREE**

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.

Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
<p>The main stakeholder to lead on the recommendation implementation is the Agency for Social Assistance. UNICEF has offered TA and support for strengthening the work of the CPDs in the country to ASA management.</p> <p>UNICEF will also follow up the recommendation through the CPD mid-term review envisaged in 2025 and explore interest of the Government for such an intervention.</p>	Daniela Koleva	Dec 2025	Underway	A meeting with ASA Child Protection Directorate has been agreed for Jan. Key interventions related to CP system strengthening are also included in UNICEF project concept note submitted to SEM.	UNICEF Concept Note for SEM
<p>Evaluation Recommendation 3: Development of community-based services. Using the results of the National Map of Social Services and the reported disparities in services nationwide as a base line,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Analyse the extent to which available community-based services meet the needs of children and families. ✓ Develop a mechanism for continued monitoring and development of available community services. 					
<p>Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): PARTIALLY AGREE</p>					
<p>If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.</p>					
Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
The primary stakeholders responsible for the implementation of the	Dessislava Encheva	Dec 2025	Not started	N/A	N/A

<p>recommendation are the MLSP, ASA and AQSS. UNICEF will advocate with them and also with other key partners and stakeholders from local authorities, academia, CSOs, etc. to raise awareness on the importance of the recommendation, its impact and offer its technical support.</p> <p>UNICEF will also continue advocating and supporting the MoH, MoE and MLSP with strengthening national policies, programmes and practices for ECD and ECI provision.</p>	<p>Snezhana Radeva Vania Kaneva</p>	<p>Dec 2025</p>	<p>Underway</p>	<p>TA provided for the ECD Action plan for 2024, ECI modelling and scale up envisaged in 2025 including through the Telethon in 2025. The event will be also used as an advocacy moment for changing attitudes towards children with disabilities.</p>	<p>UNICEF Bulgaria Annual report</p>
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Evaluation Recommendation 4: Foster care:

- ✓ Undertake a review to understand the reasons for withdrawal of registered foster carers and the steps that need to be taken to recruit new foster carers and ensure retention of existing and new foster families.
- ✓ Develop a communication strategy on foster care to increase recruitment and address negative public perceptions of foster carers.
- ✓ A funding mechanism for activities related to recruitment and evaluation of foster carers, training, support and monitoring should be developed and provided for within the State budget;

- ✓ The Ordinance on the terms and conditions for application, selection and approval of foster families and placement of children in them should be updated.
- ✓ Recruit and train a cadre of professional, specialist foster parents to care for children with disabilities both short and medium term and other children with complex needs/ difficult to place children including unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children.

Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): **PARTIALLY AGREE**

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.

Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
The key stakeholders responsible for FC service provision and regulation are MLSP and ASA. UNICEF will continue supporting them for the full and effective implementation of the recommendation.	Daniela Koleva	Dec 2025	Underway	In 2024, ASA has initiated changes in the national FC project including strengthening RDSA role in monitoring, including a communication campaign on FC, etc. In addition, the Ordinance on FC was amended in July 2024. UNICEF has provided input and supported the revisions of the Ordinance including the annex with standards for a quality FC placement. The CO has also provided	All documents referred to and UNICEF input are available in Bulgarian.

				TA for the up-date of the FC financial standard and the Methodology for foster parents assessment and approval which was developed at the end of 2024 and approved in Jan 2025.	
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Evaluation Recommendation 5: Data collection and monitoring. Relevant agencies should improve routine data collection and the management and analysis of community-based programmes at a national level to promote and secure evidence-based decision making on the effectiveness of services and current gaps in provision for target groups (CWD and other hard to place children). All data should be disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity and geographical location.

Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): **PARTIALLY AGREE**

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.

Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
UNICEF will continue supporting NSI and the relevant ministries and agencies to improve data collection, management and reporting.	Elena Atanassova	Dec 2025	Underway	UNICEF has provided TA and support to the SACP for the development of a project, funded by ESF+, related to CP system strengthening which envisages the development of a national information system.	Надграждане на капацитета на системите за закрила на детето Оперативна програма "Развитие на човешките ресурси" 2014-2020

Evaluation Recommendation 6: Training: Develop compulsory pre-service and in-service training modules for all social workers, residential care workers and foster carers on child development, children’s mental health and challenging behaviour					
Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): PARTIALLY AGREE					
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.					
Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
UNICEF will continue supporting the relevant stakeholders and duty bearers for the implementation of the recommendation. In 2025, the CO has envisaged to validate the SSW training programme ‘Building Competencies in Interpersonal Communication and Community Engagement’ developed by UNICEF ECARO in partnership with Columbia School for Social Work	Dessislava Encheva Daniela Koleva	Sep 2026	Underway	UNICEF has initiated a partnership with the KHC for alternative care at the NBU which is expected to be finalised by March 2025. The project will aim to adapt and validate the programme and its timeframe is 18 months.	Initial project proposal and concept by the KHC for alternative care at NBU and e-mail correspondence
Evaluation Recommendation 7: Review the effectiveness of different co-ordination mechanisms, as well as case management guidance and methodologies, with the aim of strengthening inter-sectoral coordination and provision of integrated support for children and families. In particular, intersectoral coordination mechanisms between MLSP, MoES and MoH on early identification and inclusive education and that of MLSP on childcare reform and support provided to vulnerable children and families should be strengthened.					
Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): PARTIALLY AGREE					
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.					
Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
UNICEF will continue advocating for the implementation of the recommendation. In addition, during the MTR of the CPD, UNICEF will review its current programmatic work and	Daniela Koleva	TBC during the MTR	Not started	N/A	N/A

interventions related to systems strengthening and improved co-ordination and consider how it can further support the implementation of the recommendation.					
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Evaluation Recommendation 8: FTPCs:
 Reduce the number of children in FTPCs;

- ✓ Reduce maximum capacity of FTPC to 8 children
- ✓ Review the basis on which FTPCs are financed to ensure the viability of homes once maximum capacity is reduced, taking into account that children have different needs / costs depending upon individual factors, such as age, disability, gender etc.
- ✓ As part of the financial review, develop a strategy for the recruitment and retention of staff, including remuneration and career progression.
- ✓ Each child's placement to be subject to regular reviews, no less than every six months.
- The statutory prohibition on placement of a child under 3 in a FTPC to be amended and the age raised each year, reaching 7 years of age over the next 5 years.

Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): **AGREE**

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.

Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
UNICEF will continue advocating for implementation of the recommendation with key stakeholders such as MLSP, ASA, AQSS, SACP, etc. This will include but is not restricted to promotion of the UNICEF ECARO White paper on small scale residential care and convening discussions on current use of residential care in Bulgaria and the need for its further reform.	Dessislava Encheva Daniela Koleva	Dec 2027	Not started	N/A	UNICEF White paper on the role of small-scale residential care

Evaluation Recommendation 9: For special pedagogical schools and correctional schools:

- ✓ Every resident child to be assessed with a view to reintegration with parents or if not possible / in the best interests of the child, placement in kinship care or foster care

✓ Alternatives to placement to be developed including counselling services, mental health services, adolescent drug and alcohol services and youth services, including services for children leaving care and access to remedial education and life-skills training.

Management Response: (Agree, Partially Agree, Disagree): PARTIALLY AGREE

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons: The recommendation lies beyond UNICEF capacity but the one of the Government.

Actions planned	Responsible Office/Person	Expected completion date	Implementation stage: Not Started Underway Completed Cancelled	Actions taken	Supporting documents
The key stakeholder for special pedagogical schools and correctional schools is the MES and the assessment /reassessment should be led by the CPD. UNICEF will continue advocating for its implementation and provide the TA and support if needed.	Dessislava Encheva Daniela Koleva	Dec 2027	Not started	N/A	
Building on its leadership role with setting and advancing the inclusive education agenda in Bulgaria, CRC recommendations and discussions with key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and the Ombudsperson's office, UNICEF is also currently providing support for the conceptualization and implementation of a comprehensive analysis of inclusive education policies, programmes and practices.	Maria Yankova	Dec 2027	Not started	A ToR is currently being considered.	